Marcel Ray Duriez

Nevaeh

Book: 56

‘If I Say I Wanna Stay’

1

(The Black Family- and its Tree)

Carrie rolled her eyes at Karrah and turned to me, the one that is next to me some nights. 'Pretty please,' she said as she rocked a- by baby- rock a-by, to sleep in her lap.

'I never get to hear you play anymore.' 'Come on,' Karrah said. 'You’re among family.' 'Why not, Earn?' Ana said. 'Are you such a classical-music snob?' 'It’s not that,' I said, suddenly feeling panicked. 'It’s just that the two styles don’t fit together.' 'Says who?' Mom asked, her eyebrows raised at what she

said. 'Yes, who knew you were such musical emanations?' Karrah joked. Beth took my hand and caressed the inside of my wrist with her fingers. 'Do it for me. I want to play with you. Just once.'
'Absolutely,' Ana said sweetly.

I was about to shake my head and ass, to endorse that my French horn had no place among the jamming guitars, no place in the metal-rock world, yet I was going to do this, I had the look yet not the style on the inside, coming out.

Though- like it was because she was hopped up on marshmallows, not because she had any desire to hear me play-and Ana and Carrie and Karrah all

peering at me as this mattered, and Beth, looking as awed and proud as he always did when he listened to me play. Nevertheless, then I looked out at Mom, who was smirking at me as if issuing a challenge, and Dad, who was tapping on his pipe, pretending to be nonchalant so as not to apply any pressure, and Naddalin, who was jumping up and down. And I was a little scared of falling on my face, of not blending, of making bad music. Nevertheless, the entire world was looking at me so intently, wanting me to join in so much, and I realized that sounding bad was not the worst thing in the world that could happen.

So, I played my guitar ‘till my fingers bleed, I was going to make it. And even though you would not think it, the French horn did not sound half bad with all those guitars, something new I thought. It sounded pretty- amazingly good- if I do say so myself self-and I do that a lot.

7:14 A.M.

It is sunrise, and inside the clinic, there is a different kind of beginning, going down, a rustling of covers, a clearing of the eye's girls rubbing them and those too- if you get that- if.

In some ways, the clinic that I am in never goes to sleep, with a mind like ours that is never- ever really at rest.

Nevertheless, even though it is still dark outside, the lights stay on, and the nurses stay awake, you can tell that thing is waking up. Frowning as they scribble notes in my chart as though I have let them down, the doctors are back, yanking on my eyelids, shining their lights at me.

She reads my chart and listens to updates from the nurses on my uncomfortable night, which makes her even more tired, having to deal with me and, the fact I am wasting her time. I do

not care anymore, I am tired of this all, and it will be over soon, and I can go back there to my school and old life that got me here in the first place.

~*~

The social worker is back on duty again, too, looking at me in my room legs spread, cum-m-ing hard, yet here that is all you must do, from 8 to 7 P.M, yet that the up nightgown shot- it not my felt if they want to look- right. Then she noticed the bloodstain on my blanket, from the period that I had 2 nights back that I never changed the sheets, they will say that is low self-esteem- um sure it is- sure, more like I do not give two craps, and

tasked with hustling me off to get me a new one, is not worth it, they say, if I do not care either, so they think. Like girls my age anymore do not wear underwire, they say I must, but I do not have to do anything anyone says I have to… like I open your mouth and spit in it, how about that?! (YOU LOVE's me CUZ I'S CUTE!)

It looks like the night's sleep had a negligible impact on her. After Ana left, there were not any more visitors. I guess Carrie has run out of people to lobby me with. Her eyes are still heavy, her hair a kinky mess. The nurse with blue-black skin is also back. She greeted me by telling me how glad she was to see me

this morning, how she had been thinking about me last night, hoping I would be here.

I wonder if this deciding business is something that all the nurses are aware of. Nurse Raymirez sure knew about it. And I think the nurse with me now knows it, too, judging by how congratulatory she is acting that I made it through the night. I am waiting for Beth to come back. Though it seems like he has been gone for an eternity, it has only been an hour. And he asked me to wait, so I will. That is the least I can do for her. And Carrie seems like she knows it, too, with the way she has been marching everyone through

here. I like these nurses so much. I hope they will not take my decision personally.

My eyes are closed so I hear him before I see him. I hear the raspy, quick rushes of his lungs. He is panting like he just ran a marathon. I am so tired now that I can barely blink my eyes, rub them and then that too just like the girl in the bed next to me- her name- yes, I know it, yes, I forgot. It is all just a matter of time, and part of me wonders why I am delaying the inevitable. But I know why.

Then I smell the sweat on her, a clean musky scent that I would bottle and wear as perfume if I could. I open my eyes. Beth has closed his. But the lids are

puffy and pink, so I know what he has been doing. Is that why he went away? To cry without my seeing?

She does not so much sit in the chair as fall into it, like clothes heaped onto the floor at the end of a long day. He covers his face with his hands and takes deep breaths to steady herself. After a minute, he drops his hands into his lap. 'Just listen to the little lady, saying twelve-year-old,' she says with a voice that sounds like shrapnel.

2

(Going back)

I open my eyes wide now. I sit up as much as I can. And I listen. 'Stay- a good girl like I am a puppy.' With that one word, Beth’s voice catches, but he swallows the emotion and pushes forward. 'There’s no word for what happened to you. There is like um- the no-good side of it, but there is something to live for. And I am not talking about me. But I cannot wrap my mind around the notion of you not getting old, having kids, going to Juilliard, getting to play that French horn in front of a huge audience, so that they can get the chills the way I do every time I see you pick up your bow, every time I see you smile at me.

I mean, I know that your life is f*cked up no matter what now, forever. And I am not dumb enough to think that I can undo that, that anyone can.

I hear him take gulp-fuels of air to steady herself. And then she continues: 'All I can think about is how f*cked up it would be for your life to end here, now.

And I think: I love you.

It is just, I do not know- I do not NO.

I am talking shit. I know I am in shock. I know I haven’t digested what happened to your parents, to Naddalin...' When he says Naddalin, his voice cracks

and an avalanche of tears tumble down her face.

'If you stay, I will do whatever you want, even that- even that- all and holly. I will quit the band, go with you to New York, that is what I said I would do. That is-is… and her voice goes soft and ends.

But if you need me to go away, I will do that, too.

I was talking to Maylie, and she said coming back to your old life would just be too painful, that it would be easier for you to erase us. And that would suck, but I would do it. I can lose you like that if

I do not lose you today. I will let you go. If you stay.'

Then it was Beth who let us go. Her sobs burst like fists thrashing against tender flesh.

I close my eyes. I cover my ears. I cannot watch this. I cannot hear this.

But then, it is no longer Beth that I hear. It is that sound, the low moan that in an instant takes flight and turns into something sweet.

It is the French horn.

Beth has placed headphones over my lifeless ears and is laying an iPod down on my chest.

She is apologizing, saying that he knows this is not my favorite, but it was the best he could do. She turns up the volume so-o I can hear the music floating across the morning air. Then she takes my hand.

The low piano plays as if in a warning. In comes, the French horn, like a heart bleeding.

And it is like something inside of me implodes.

I am sitting around the breakfast table with my family, drinking hot coffee, laughing at Naddalin’s chocolate-chip mustache.

The snow is blowing outside.

I am visiting a cemetery; Three graves under a tree on a hill overlooking the clear river.

I am lying with Beth, my head on her chest, on a sandy bank next to the river.

I am hearing people say the word orphan and be still that they are talking about me.

I am walking through New York City with Ana, the skyscrapers so big, casting shadows on our faces, as he swings holding hands, making the heart thing too.

I am holding Naddalin on my lap, tickling him as she giggles so hard, she keels over, over the fact she is shy and I was kissing her all cutey woo-z-ie, holding hand sweetly.

My mom is going through my little girl is dead stage… over me coming out.

I am sitting with my French horn; the one Mom and Dad gave me after my first presentation. My fingers caress the wood and the pegs, which time and touch have worn smooth.

My bow is poised over the strings now. I am looking at my hand, waiting to start playing.

I am looking at my hand, being held by Beth's hand…

Like- it is like the piano and French horn are being poured into my body, the same way that the IV and Ritalin transfusions are, and what they do to me, they say it mellows me out, yet inside I am going nuts. Until I cannot be like this one second longer.

And the memories of my life as it was, and the flashes of it as it might be, are coming so-o fast and furious. I feel-

like- I can no longer keep up with them, nevertheless, they keep coming, and everything, everyone, and all things are colliding until I cannot take it anymore.

There is a blinding flash, a pain that rips through, that feel like is rushing through my nervous system, and I start sweating hard, dreaming weird, or cannot sleep, the boom- boom in my chest is wrong like me everything is and I do is wrong, me for one shooting instant, a silent scream from my broken body. For the first time, I can sense how fully agonizing staying will be. I have a tough time breathing too…

But then again, I feel Beth's hand. Not since it, but feel it. I am not sitting huddled in the chair anymore. I am lying on my back in the hospital bed, once again with my body, shaking hard, I just tremble all the time, and it is all too much.

Nevertheless, I am also feeling all that I have in my life, which includes what I have lost, as well as the great indefinite of what life might still bring me. Grasping mine, the feelings pile up, intimidating to crack my chest wide open. The only way to continue them is to concentrate on Beth's hand.

Beth is crying and somewhere inside of me, I am crying, too, because I am feeling things at last. I am feeling not just physical pain, but all that I have lost, and it is profound and catastrophic and will leave a crater in me that nothing will ever fill.

I picture my hand stroking Naddalin's hair, grasping a bow poised above my French horn, interlaced with Beth's.

I aim every remaining ounce of energy into my right hand. Besides, unexpectedly, I just need to hold his hand more than I have never-ever needed anything in this world. Not just be held by

it, but hold it back. I am weak, and this is so hard. It is the hardest thing I will ever have to do.

And then I squeeze, feeling the drug come out of me- like girl-cum out of me.

I summon all the love I have ever felt, I summon all the strength that Nana and Gramps Black and Ana and the nurses and Carrie have given me.

I summon all the breath that Mom, Dad, and Naddalin would fill me with if they could. I summon all my strength, focus it like a laser beam into the fingers and palm of my right hand.

If it registered, I slump back, spent, unsure of whether I just did what I did, of what it means; If it matters.

It is the first time today I can truly hear her. Nevertheless, then Beth's grip tightens so that the grasp of his hand feels like it is holding my entire body. And then I hear the sharp intake of his breath followed by the sound of her voice.

'Earn?' she asks. But now I wonder, like- like- like, and now, I hope. 'Like it could lift me right out of this bed.' CUZ- Because, um- when I go, I want to 'member Ana. And I want to remember her like this: telling a funny story, fighting with her crazy mom, being cheered on by

punkers, rising to the occasion, finding little pockets of strength in herself that she had no idea she owned.

Beth is a different story.

Remembering Beth would be like behind her all over again, and I am not sure if I can bear that on top of everything else.

Ana’s up to the part of Action Distraction when Brooke Bogel and a dozen assorted punks descended upon the clinic.

She tells me that before they got to the ICU, she was so scared of getting

into trouble, but how when she burst into the ward, she had felt ecstatic.

When the guard had grabbed her, she had not been scared at all. 'I kept thinking, what's the worst that could happen? I go to jail; I do not let them have their way with me.

She stops for a minute, Mom has a conniption, I get grounded for a year.' 'But after what has happened today, that would be nothing. Even going to jail would be easily compared to losing you.'

I am after all considerable risk… whatever that means…!

I have a feeling that once you live through something like this, you developed a little bit invincible.

I know that Ana's telling me this to try to keep me alive. She does not remember that weirdly, her remark frees me, just like Gramps's authorization did.

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I know it will be awful for Ana when I die, but I also think about what she said, about not being scared, about the jail being easy compared to losing me. And that is how I know that Ana will be okay. Losing me will hurt; it will be the kind of pain that will not feel real at first,

and when it does, it will take her breath away. And the rest of her senior year will suck, what with her getting all that cloying your-best-friend's-dead sympathy that will drive her so crazy, and because really, we are each other's only close friend at school.

But she will deal. She will move on. She will leave Oregon. She will go to Middle School. She will make new friends. She will fall in love. She will become a photographer, the kind who never has to go on a helicopter. And I bet she will be a stronger person because of what she has lost today.

I know that makes me a bit of a hypocrite. If that is the case, shouldn't I stay? Soldier through it? Maybe if I had had some practice, maybe if I had had more devastation in my life, I would be more prepared to go on. It is not that my life has been perfect. I have had disappointments and I have been lonely, frustrated, and angry and all the crappy stuff everyone feels. But in terms of heartbreak, I have been spared. I have never toughened up enough to handle what I would have to handle if I were to stay.

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Ana is now telling me about being rescued from certain incarceration by Carrie. As she describes how Carrie took charge of the whole hospital, there is such admiration in her voice. I picture Ana and Carrie becoming friends, even though there are twenty years between them. It makes me happy to imagine them drinking tea or going to the movies together, still connected by the invisible chain of a family that no longer exists.

Now Ana is listing all the people who are at the hospital or who have been, during the day, ticking them off with her fingers: 'Your grandparents and aunts, uncles, and cousins. Beth and Brooke

Bogel and the various rabble-rousers who came with her. Beth’s bandmates Dianna and Jodi and Maylie and her girlfriend, Sarah, all of whom have been downstairs in the waiting room since they got heaved out of the ICU. Professor Kristiee, who drove down and stayed half the night before driving back so she could sleep a few hours and shower and make some morning appointments she had.

Karrah and the baby, who are on their way over right now because the baby woke up at five in the morning and Karrah called us and said that he could not stay at home any longer. And me and Mom,' Ana concludes. 'Shoot. I lost count

of how many people that was. But it was a lot. And more have called and asked to come, but your aunt Diane told them to wait.

She says that we are making enough nuisance of ourselves. And I think by ‘us,’ she means me and Beth.' Ana stops and smiles for a split second. Then she makes this funny noise, a cross between a cough and a throat clearing. I have heard her make this sound before; it is what she does when she is summoning her courage, getting ready to jump off the rocks and into the bracing river water.

'I do have a point to all this,' she continues. 'There are like twenty people

in that waiting room right now. Some of them are related to you. Some of them are not. But we're all your family.'

She stops now; leans over me so that the wisps of her hair tickle my face. She kisses me on the forehead. 'You still have a family,' she whispers.

Last summer, we hosted an accidental Labor Day party at our house. It had been a busy season. Camp for me. Then we went to Gram's family's Massachusetts retreat. I felt like I had barely seen Beth and Ana all summer.

My parents were lamenting that they had not seen Carrie and Karrah and

the baby in months. 'Karrah says she’s starting to walk,' Dad noted that morning. We were all sitting in the living room in front of the fan, trying not to melt. Oregon was having a record heatwave. It was ten in the morning and pushing ninety-five degrees.

Mom looked up at the calendar. 'She’s ten months old already. Where has, the time gone?' Then she looked at Naddalin and me. 'How is it humanly possible that I have a daughter who’s starting her senior year in high school? How in the hell can my baby boy be starting second grade?'

'I’m not a baby,' Naddalin shot back, clearly insulted.

'Sorry, kid, unless we have another one, you’ll always be my baby.'

'Another one?' Dad asked with a simulated alarm.

'Relax. I’m kidding ' Mom said. 'Let us see how I feel when Earn leaves for Middle School.'

'I’m going to be eight in December.

‘Then I’m a Lady and you’ll have to call me

‘That not a baby.’'

'Is that so?' I laughed, spraying orange juice through my nose.

'That’s what Casey Corson told me,' Naddalin said, his mouth set into a strongminded line.

My parents and I groaned, at me. Casey Corson was Naddalin’s best friend, and we all liked him a lot and thought his parents seemed like such nice people, so we did not get how they could give their child such a ridiculous name.

'Well, if Casey Corson says so,' I said, giggling, and soon Mom and Dad were laughing, too.

'What’s so-o amusing?' Naddalin demanded.

'Nothing, Little girl,' Dad said. 'It’s just the heat.'

'Can we still do sprinklers today?' Naddalin asked. Dad had promised her he could run through the sprinklers that evening even though the administrator had asked everyone in the state to conserve water this summer. That request had peeved Dad, who claimed that we Oregonians suffer eight months of rain a year and should be exempt from ever worrying about water preservation.

Naddalin seemed placated. 'If the baby can walk, (meaning me) then she can walk through the hoses. Can she come into the sprinklers with me?' 'Damn straight you can,' Dad said. 'Flood the place if you want.'

'We could have a barbecue,' Dad said. 'It is Labor Day and grilling in this heat would certainly qualify as labor.' Mom looked at Dad. 'That’s not a bad idea,' she said. 'I think Carrie’s off today.'

'Plus, we’ve got a freezer full of steaks from when your father decided to order that side of beef,' Mom said. 'Why not?'

'Can Beth come?' I asked.

'We haven’t seen much of your young man lately.' 'Of course,' Mom said.

Grams had only recently planted the seed of Juilliard in my head, but it had not taken root. I have not decided to apply yet. Things with Beth had not gotten bizarre up till now. 'I know,' I said. 'Things are starting to happen for the band,' I said. At the time, I was excited about it; genuinely and completely.

'If the rock star can handle a humble eat outside with quadrangles like us,' Dad joked.

'If he can handle a square like me, he can handle tetragons like you,' I joked back. 'I think I'll invite Ana, too.'

'The more the cheerier,' Mom said. 'We'll make it a puncture like in the olden days.'

'When dinosaurs roamed the earth?' Naddalin asked.

'Accurately,' Dad said. 'When dinosaurs traveled the earth and your mom and, I was younger.'

Karrah, Carrie, the baby, Beth, who brought Jodi, Ana, who brought a cousin visiting from New Jersey, plus a whole bunch of friends of my parents

whom they had not seen in ages. About twenty people showed up.

It was because it was so hot, or that the party was so last minute, or maybe because everything tasted better on the grill, but it was one of those meals that you know you will remember.

Dad hauled our ancient barbecue out of the basement and spent the afternoon scrubbing it. We grilled up steaks and, tofu pups and veggie burgers, this being Oregon; there was watermelon. . . which we kept cool in a bucket of ice, and a salad made with vegetables from the organic farm that some of Mom and Dad’s friends had underway.

Mom and I made three pies with wild blackberries that Naddalin and I had picked. We drank Pepsi out of these old-fashioned bottles that Dad had found at some ancient country store, and I swear they tasted better than the regular kind.

When Dad turned on the sprinkler for Naddalin and the baby, everyone else decided to run through it.

We left it on so long that the brown grass turned into a big slippery wet patch and I wondered if the governor herself might come and tell us off.

Naddalin had taken his shirt off, besides had streaked herself with muck ’n

mud. Dad said he looked like one of the boys from Lord of the Flies. Beth tackled me and we laughed and squirmed around on the lawn.

It was so hot, I did not bother changing into dry clothes, just kept dousing myself whenever I got too sweaty. By the end of the day, my sundress was stiff.

When it cooled off, Dad lit a campfire on the lawn, and we roasted marshmallows. Then the musical instruments give the impression and ideas.

When it started to get dark, most people left to catch the fireworks display at the university or to see a band called Ariana Grande play in town. A handful of people, including Beth, Ana, Carrie, and Karrah, stayed, to see her half-naked on stage, riding a dick bicycle, like when Niki said the part of having a tricycle does that mean she has a 3rd leg? Asked Ana? A dick bicycle is when you remove the set and have your girl-ie hold and girl-ie lips- down on the part sticking up… dah! What? They all looked at her dumbly!

That sounds a little kind of a-bit painful- and well bloody.

‘God, you're dumb!’

‘OH-!’

Dad’s snare drum from the house, Karrah’s guitar from his car, Beth’s spare guitar from my room. Everyone was jamming together, singing songs: Dad’s songs, Beth’s songs, old Clash songs, old Wipers songs. Naddalin was dancing around, the blond-haired person of his hair reflecting the golden flames.

I remember watching it all and getting that tickling in my chest and thinking to myself: This is what happiness feels like.

4

At one point, Dad and Beth stopped playing and I caught them whispering about something. Then they went inside, to get more beer, they claimed. But when they returned, they were carrying my French horn.

'Oh, no, I’m not giving a concert,' I said.

'We don’t want you to,' Dad said. 'We want you to play with us.'

'No way,' I said. Beth had occasionally tried to get me to 'jam' with her and I always refused. Lately, he had started joking about us playing air-guitar-

air-French horn duets, which was about as far as I was willing to go.

'Sure, Naddalin,' I said feigning interest. The idea of me going to New York was becoming increasingly real, and though this commonly filled me with a nervous, excited, if conflicted, image of me and Naddalin hanging out together on New Year’s Eve left me feeling unbearably lonely.

Mom looked at me, eyebrows arched. 'It’s New Year’s Day, so I won’t give you shit for coming in at this hour. But if you are hungover, you’re grounded.'

'I’m not. I had one beer. I’m only tired.'

Mom nodded, 'Only tired, is it? You sure?'

Mom grabbed ahold of my wrist and turned me toward her. When she saw my stricken expression, she tilted her head to the side as if to say, You okay? I shrugged and bit my lip to keep from losing it.

She handed me a cup of coffee and led me to the table. She put down a plate of hash and a thick slice of sourdough bread, and even though I could not imagine being hungry, my mouth

watered, and my stomach rumbled, and I was suddenly ravenous.

I ate silently, Mom watching me all the while. After everyone was done, Mom sent the rest of them into the living room to watch the Rose Parade on TV.

She stood there silently, letting me blubber all over her sweater. When I stopped, she held out the sponge. 'Everyone out,' she ordered. 'Earn and I will do the washing up.'

As soon as everyone was gone, Mom turned to me and I just fell against her, crying, and releasing all the tension and uncertainty of the last few weeks.

'You wash, I'll dry; we will talk. I always find it calming.

The warm water, the soap.'

'So-o, perfect that I never even thought about the future. About it taking us in different directions.'

Mom picked up the dish towel and we went to work. And I told her about Beth and me. 'It was like we had this perfect year and a half,' I said.

Mom's smile was both sad and knowing. 'I thought about it.'

I turned to her. She was staring straight out the window, watching a couple of sparrows bathe in a puddle. 'I

remember last year when Beth came over for Christmas Eve. I told your father that you'd fallen in love too soon.'

'I know, I know. What does a dumb kid know about love?'

You guys seemed, still seem, in love, truly, deeply.' She sighed. 'But seventeen is an inconvenient time to be in love.'

Mom stopped drying a skillet. 'That's not what I meant. The opposite. You and Beth never struck me as a 'high-school' relationship.'

Mom said making quote marks with her hands. 'It was nothing like the

drunken roll in the back of some girl's Cadillac XTS in dark gray, that passed for a relationship when I for one was in high school. I love that car I feel like I high-class b*tch in it, even if that is not so-o, I am kind of a slut and I know and they do too… yet whatever, I like to get it from both, and whenever- however, and whomever it is all the same- it feels good, is this is the way… they say a girl that is 12 like me is oversexed, and I say not- when I look at well you!

(Hoo-ha hacking- and hocking it up- slut! Yes you- the reader- slut!)

That made me smile and made the pit in my stomach soften a little. 'Tell

me about it,' I said. 'Though if we weren't both musicians, we could go to Middle School together and be fine.' 'I guess you're right.'

That what she said too…

'That's a cop-out, Earn,' Mom countered. 'All relationships are tough. Just like with music, sometimes you have harmony, and other times you have cacophony. I don't have to tell you that.'

'And come on, music brought you two together. That is what your father and I always thought. You were both in love with music and then you fell in love with each other. It was a little like that for

your dad and me. I did not play but I listened. Luckily, I was a little older when we met.'

Mom shook her head. 'That’s bullshit. Music cannot do that. Life might take you down different roads. But each of you gets to decide which one to take.' She turned to face me. 'Beth’s not trying to stop you going to Juilliard, is he?' I want to be something thing someday, even if they say I- is not that smart enough too or do not have the money. I am going to go there someday when I grow up! (lisp cutely with her voice.)

(Blink- Blink- Blink…)

I had never told Mom about what Beth had said that night after the half-naked Ariana concert- with her showing off her goodies, (I have a pic, so her puss- we all do- and she likes me will always be remembered for her blue dildo, yet I love her for it she a real girl after all… nice.) image what that would sell for on eBay- Ariana dildo- going once, going twice, sold to the pervert in the back for a mill. What-a he planning to do with it um-like suction cupping it to his forehead, like a unicorn? Even if it was not one of those sucks-ie ones come on really… God I have problems, don't I?

(I think too much, don't I?)

5

So, when I asked her why me? How the music was a part of it. 'Yes, but now I feel like it’s music that’s going to pull us apart.'

'No more than I’m trying to get him to move to New York. And it is all ridiculous anyway. I might not even go.'

'No, you might not. But you are going somewhere. I think we all get that. And the same is true for Beth.'

'At least he can go somewhere while still living here.'

Mom shrugged. 'Maybe. For now, anyhow.'

I put my face in my hands and shook my head. 'What am I going to do?' I lamented. 'I feel like I’m caught in a tug-of-war.'

Mom shot me a sympathetic scowl. 'I don’t know. But I do know that if you want to stay and be with him, I will support that, though maybe I am only saying that because I do not think you would be able to turn down Juilliard.

Nonetheless, I would understand if you chose to love, Beth’s love for music, either way, you win. And either way, you lose. What can I tell you? Love’s a bitch.'

Beth and I talked about it once more after that. We were at House of Rock, sitting on his futon. He was riffing about on his acoustic guitar.

'I might not get in,' I told her. 'I might wind up at school here, with you. In a way, I hope I don’t get accepted so I don’t have to choose.'

'If you get in, the choice is-already made, isn’t it?' Beth asked.

It was. I would go. It did not mean I would stop loving Beth or that we would break up, but Mom and Beth were both right. I would not turn down Juilliard.

Beth was silent for a minute, plinking away at his guitar so-o loud, that I almost missed it when he said, 'I don’t want to be the guy who doesn’t want you to go. If the tables were turned, you’d let me go.'

'I kind of already have. In a way, you are already gone. To your Juilliard,' I said.

'I know,' Beth said quietly. 'But I’m still here. And I’m still crazy in love with you.'

'Me, too,' I said. And then we stopped talking for a while as Beth

strummed an unfamiliar melody. I asked him what he was playing.

'I’m calling it ‘The Girlfriend’s-Going to-Juilliard-Leaving-My-Metal - Heart-in-Slivers Blues,’' he said, singing the title in an overstated twangy voice. Then he smiled that silly shy smile that I felt came from the truest part of her.

'I’m kidding.'

'Good,' I said.

'Sort of,' she added.

6

5:44 A.M.

I am on round 5 and hot and sweaty, and nude as all butt crack! Beth is gone, so-o it is on 6 I go for 2 ½ hours of sleep and then there day they want me to do.

She suddenly rushed out, calling Nurse Ramirez that she had forgotten something important and would be back as soon as he could. She was already out the door when she told her that she was about to get off work.

She just left, but not before making sure to inform the nurse who had relieved Old Grumpy that 'the young man with the skinny pants and messy hair' is allowed to see me when he returns.

Carrie’s running back and forth, a gleam in her eye. She is up to something, I cannot say, but whether it is trotting out loved ones to lobby on behalf of my continuing my earthly existence or whether she is simply bringing them in to say good-bye.

After Grams and Gramps and Beth,

Aunt Kate stopped by. Then it was Aunt Diane and Uncle Dan. Then my cousins shuffled in. Not that it matters, nothing at all matters. Carrie rules the school now. She has been marching the troops through here all morning.

Poor Ana…

~*~

She looks like she slept in a dumpster, now it is Ana's turn. Her hair has staged a full-scale rebellion and more of it has escaped her mangled braid then still is all tucked inside.

At first, Ana squints at me, as if I am a bright, glaring light. But then it is like she adjusts to the light and decides that even though I may look like a zombie. She is wearing one of what she calls her 'turd sweaters,' the greenish, grayish, brownish lumpy masses her mom is always buying her. Even though tubes are

sticking out of every which orifice, even though there’s Ritalin injection thing-ie, on my thin blanket from where it is seeped through the bandages, I am still Earn and she is still Ana. And what do Earn and Ana like to do more than anything? Talk…

Ana settles into the chair next to my bed. 'How are you doing?' she asks.

I am not sure. I am exhausted, but at the same time, Beth’s visit has left me… I do not know what. Agitated. Anxious. Awake, unquestionably awake. Though I could not feel it when he touched me, his presence stirred me up anyhow.

I was just starting to feel grateful that he was here when she booked out of here like the devil was chasing him. Beth has spent the last ten hours trying to get in to see me, and now that he finally succeeded, he left ten minutes after arriving.

I would have run away, Maybe I scared her. He does not want to deal. I am not the only chickens hit around here. I spent the last daydreaming of her coming to me, and when he finally staggered into the ICU, if I had the strength.

She tells me about Beth, his determination to get in to see me, how

after he got kicked out of the ICU, he enlisted with the help of her music friends, who were not at all the snobby semesters she had imagined to be. Then she told me that a bona fide rock star had come to the hospital on my behalf.

'Well, you would not believe the crazy night it’s been,' Ana says. Then she starts telling me about it. About her mom’s hysterics, about how she lost it in front of my relatives, who were very gracious about the whole thing.

The fight they had outside the Benadom Theater in front of a bunch of punks and hipsters. When Ana shouted at her crying mother to 'pull it together and

start acting like the adult around here' and then stalked off into the club leaving a shocked Ms. Schein at the curb, a group of girls' in spiked leather and shining hair cheered and high-fived her.

Of course, I know everything that Ana is telling me, but there is no way that she would know that. Besides, I like having her verification the day to me. I like how Ana is talking to me normally, like Gram's did earlier, just jabbering on, revolving a good yarn, as if we were together on my porch, drinking coffee (or an iced caramel Frappuccino in Ana's case) and catching up.

AT the X-Ray, even though I have never heard Dead Moon play live, even though the X-Ray Café shut down before I was born.

But sometimes the memories feel so real, so visceral, so personal, that I blur out this… them with my own. Not just a sense that I have heard the story before, but that I have lived it. I can picture myself sitting on the riverbank as Dad pulls a hot-pink Coho out of the water, even though Dad was all of twelve at the time. Or I can hear the feedback when Dead Moon played 'D.O.A.'

I do not know if once you die you remember things that happened to you

when you were alive. It makes a certain logical sense that you would not. That being dead will feel like before you were born, which is to say, a whole lot of nothingness. Except for that for me, at least, my pre-birth years are not entirely blank. Now and again, Mom or Dad will be telling a story about something, about Dad catching his first salmon with Gramps, or Mom remembering the amazing Dead Moon concert she saw with Dad on their first date, and I will have an overpowering déjà vu.

I never told anyone about these 'recollections.' Mom would have said that I was there as one of the eggs in her

ovaries. Dad would have joked that he and Mom had tortured me with their stories one too many times and had inadvertently brainwashed me.

And Gram’s would have told me that I was there as an angel before I chose to become Mom and Dad’s kid.

Beth is incoherently babbling something now. In a deep voice. Over and over, he is saying: please. Please. Please. Please, Please. Finally, he stops and looks at my face. 'Please, Earn,' she implores. 'Don’t make me write a song.'

I was not immune to the charms of the opposite sex, the girl is all I wanted

over being hurt, yet I would never say that to anyone but you- I trust you, but I was not one of those romantic, swoony girls who had pink fluffy daydreams about falling in love.

I had never expected to fall in love. I was never the kind of girl who had crushes on rock stars or fantasies about marrying- Brad Pitt. I sort of vaguely knew that one day I would have boyfriends (in Middle School, if Ana's prediction was anything to go by) and get married, yet girls are always nice and E_Z.

Even as I was falling in love, full-throttle, intense, can't-erase-that-goofy-

smile love, I did not register what was happening. When I was with Beth, at least after those first few awkward weeks, I felt so good that I did not bother thinking about what was going on with me, with us.

I got upset because he never wrote any songs about me. She claimed he was not good with sappy love songs: 'If you want a song, you'll have to cheat on me or roughly,' he said, knowing full well that was not going to happen.

It just felt normal and right, like slipping into a hot bubble bath, think about girls. Which is not to say we did not fight. We argued over lots of stuff: him

not being nice enough to Ana, me being antisocial at shows, how fast he drove, how I stole the covers.

'So, did you knock them dead?' Beth asked me when I got back. 'They going to let you in with a full scholarship?'

This past fall, though, Beth and I started to have a different kind of fight. It was not even a fight. We did not shout. We barely even argued, but a snake of tension quietly glided into our lives. And it seemed like it all started with my Juilliard tryout, for young girls like me, to see if I could one day be all I want with a scholarship.

I had a feeling that they were going to let me in, at least-even before I told Professor Kristiee, about the one judge’s 'long time since we’ve had an Oregon country girl' comment, even before she hyperventilated because she was so convinced this was a tacit promise of admission.

Something had ensued to my playing in that audition; I had broken through some invisible barrier and could finally play the pieces like I heard them being played in my head, and the consequence had been something transcendent: the mental and bodily, the

technical and emotional sides of my abilities all finally blending.

Then, on the drive home, as Gramps and I were approaching the California-Oregon border, I just had this sudden flash-a vision of me lugging a French horn through New York City.

And it was like I knew, and that certainty planted itself in my belly like a warm secret. I am not the kind of person who is prone to premonitions or overconfidence, so I so-called, that there was more to my flash than magical thinking.

'I did okay,' I told Beth, and as I said it, I realized that I had just straight-out lied to him for the first time and that this was different from all the lying by omission I had been doing before.

So, it was not a real lie. And besides, I thought, there was no point in making a big fuss about it. I had not told Ana, either so it was not like Beth was getting special deception treatment. I had to be at the studio at seven in the morning on a Sunday and the night before I had pretended to be feeling out of sorts and told Beth he should not stay over. I had justified that fib, too. I was feeling out of sorts because I was so nervous.

I justified this to myself since it was technically true. And then Professor Kristiee arranged for me to have a recording session at the university so-o I could submit a high-quality CD to Juilliard.

I had neglected to tell Beth that I was applying to Juilliard in the first place, which was harder than it sounded. Before I sent in my application, I had to practice every spare moment with Professor Kristiee to finetune the Shostakovich concerto and the two Bach suites. When Beth asked me why I was so busy, I gave purposely vague excuses about learning tough new pieces.

7

Nonetheless, after I told him I had only done okay at the audition, I had the feeling that I was wading into quicksand, and that if I took one more step, there would be no extricating myself and I would sink until I suffocated.

Beth’s first reaction was to smile with pride. 'I wish I could’ve seen that.' But then his eyes clouded over and her lips fell into a frown. 'Why’d you downplay it?' he asked. 'Why didn’t you call me after the audition to brag?'

So, I took a deep breath and heaved myself back onto solid ground.

'That’s not true really,' I told Beth. 'I did well. I played better than I ever have in my life. It was like I was possessed.'

'I don’t know,' I said.

'Well, this is great news,' Beth said, trying to mask his hurt. 'We should be celebrating.'

'Okay, let us celebrate,' I said, with forced gaiety. 'We can go to Dauphin Saturday. Go to the Japanese Gardens and go out for dinner with the girls.'

Beth grimaced. 'I can’t. We are playing in Olympia and Seattle this weekend. Minitour; ‘member? I would love you to come, but I do not know if that

is a celebration for you. Nonetheless, I will be back Sunday late afternoon. I can meet you in Dauphin Sunday night if you want.'

'I can’t… I am playing in a string quartet at some professor’s house. What about next weekend?'

Beth looked pained. 'We’re in the studio the next couple weekends, but we can go out during the week somewhere. Around here. To the Mexican place?'

'Sure, The Mexican place,' I said.

Two minutes before, I had not even wanted to celebrate, but now I was feeling dejected and insulted at being

relegated to a midweek dinner at the same place we always went to.

When Beth graduated from high school last spring and moved out of his parents' place and into the House of Rock, I had not expected much to change.

I would miss our little powwows in the music wing, but I would also be relieved to have our relationship out from under the microscope of high school. She would still live nearby; we would still see each other all the time.

The band was offered a record deal with a medium-sized label based in Seattle and now were busy in the studio

recording. They were also playing more shows, to larger and larger crowds, every weekend. Things were so hectic that Beth had dropped half his course load and was going to middle school part-time, and if things kept up at this rate, he was thinking of dropping out altogether. 'There are no second chances,' she told me all this and that.

But things had changed when Beth moved into the House of Rock and started Middle School, though not for the reasons I had thought they would. At the beginning of the fall, just as Beth was getting used to middle School life, things

suddenly started heating up with Shooting Star.

I was genuinely excited for her. I knew that Shooting Star was something special, more than just a middle School-town band. I had not minded Beth's increasing absences, especially since he made it so clear how much he minded them. But somehow, the prospect of Juilliard made things different somehow it made my mind.

Which did not make any sense at all because if anything, it should have leveled the field? Now I had something exciting happening, too. 'We can go to

Dauphin in a few weeks,' Beth promised. 'When all the holiday lights are up.'

'Okay,' I said morosely.

Beth sighed. 'Things are getting complicated, aren’t they?'

'Yes. Our schedules are too busy,' I said.

'That’s not what I meant,' Beth said, turning my face toward her so-o I was observing at her in the eye.

'I know that’s not what you preordained,' I answered, but then a lump lodged itself in my throat, and I could not talk anymore.

We tried to defuse the tension, to talk about it without really talking about it, to jokily it. 'You know I read in US News and World Report of my middle school they'd have that's- a good music program,' Beth told me. 'It's in Salem, which is getting hipper by the moment.'

'According to who? The governor?' I replied.

'Maylie found some good stuff at a vintage-clothing store there, and was nude in the middle of the place changing, we girls today don't care, about change in front of you. And you know, once the vintage places come in, the hipsters aren't far behind.' Look if you want or do

not and shut up… there just boobs and a slit… I do not close my legs other… when I sit for, I could give a shit about being a lady now… I am a girl… so what… look at it!

8

'You forget, I’m not a hipster,' I reminded her. 'But speaking of, maybe Shooting Star should move to New York. I mean, it is the heart of the punk scene. The Ramones. Blondie.' My tone was frothy and flirtatious, an Oscar-worthy performance.

'That was thirty years ago,' Beth said. 'And even if I wanted to move to

New York, there’s no way the rest of the band would.'

She stared mournfully at his shoes and I familiar with the joking part of the conversation that had ended. My stomach lurched, an appetizer before the full part of heartache I had a feeling was going to be served at some point soon.

Beth and I had never been the kind of couple to talk about the future, about where our relationship was going, we avoided talking about anything that was happening more than a few weeks away, and this made our conversations as stilted and awkward as they had been in those early weeks together before we had

found our groove, but with things suddenly so unclear.

One afternoon in the fall, I spotted a beautiful 1933's silk gown in the vintage store where Dad bought his suits and I almost pointed it out to Beth and asked if she thought, I should wear that to the dance at the mid. year, but prom was in June and maybe Beth would be on tour in June or maybe I'd be too busy getting ready for Juilliard, so I didn't say anything.

But then he said that those guitars cost thousands of dollars, and besides his birthday was not until September, and the way he said

September, it was like a judge issuing a prison sentence. Not long after that, Beth was complaining about her decrepit guitar, saying he wanted to get a vintage Gibson ES 335 in blue, and I offered to get it for her for his birthday.

Beth got drunk, and when midnight came, he kissed me hard. 'Promise me, do you… um, hum- I'm Promise me you'll spend New Year's with me next year,' he whispered into my ear. A few weeks ago, we went to a New Year's Eve party together.

I was about to explain that even if I did go to Juilliard, I would be home for Christmas and New Year's, but then I

realized that was not the point. So-o’s I promised her since I wanted it to be true as much as he did. And I kissed him back so-o hard like I was trying to merge our bodies through our lips.

On New Year’s Day, I came home to find the rest of my family gathered in the kitchen with Karrah, Carrie, and the baby. Dad was making breakfast: smoked-salmon hash, his specialty.

Karrah shook her head when he saw me. 'Look at the kids today. It seems like just days have gone by, that stumbling home at eight o’clock felt early. Now I’d kill just to be able to sleep until eight.'

'We didn’t even make it till midnight,'

Carrie admitted, bouncing the baby on her lap.

'Good thing, because this little lady, decided to start her new year, feeling like a new girl.'

'I stayed up till midnight!' Naddalin yelled. 'I saw the ball drop on TV at twelve. It is in New York, you know? If you move there, will you take me to see it drop in real life?'

The words he writes to her music are poetry. You ever listen carefully to the things she says?' 'That’s the one. I always

thought your dad would grow up to be a writer. And in a way, I always felt like he did.

I shook my head, suddenly ashamed. I had not even realized that Dad wrote lyrics.

I just assumed that the people in front of the microphones wrote the words, she did not sing so-o. I's had seen her sit at the kitchen table with a guitar and a notepad a hundred times, for I got here at this place, where I do the same yet with others that are the same as me so's they say.

I had just never put it together. There was one song called 'Waiting for Vengeance' that I listened to and read over and over until I had it memorized. It was on the second album, and it was the only slow song they ever did; it sounded country, from Karrah's brief infatuation with hillbilly punk. I listened to it so much that I started singing it to myself without even realizing it.

That night when we got home, I went up to my room with Dad's CDs and a Discman. I checked the liner notes to see which songs Dad had written and then I painstakingly copied down all the lyrics. It was only after I saw them scrawled in my

science lab book that I saw what Gramps meant. Dad's lyrics were not just rhymes. They were something else.

What am I coming to?

Well, what is this?

And beyond that, what am I going to do?

Now there's blankness… Where once your eyes held the light, but that was so long ago. That was last night… Well, what was that?

What is that sound that I hear?

It is just my lifetime…

It is whistling past my ear…

And when I look back…

Everything seems smaller than life…

The way it has been for so long…

Since last night…

Now I am leaving…

Any moment I will be gone…

I think you will notice… me…

I think you will wonder what went wrong…

I am not choosing… U…

But I am running out of fight…

And this was decided so-o long ago…

…It was last night…

'Your song,' I said sheepishly, suddenly feeling like I had illegally trespassed into Dad’s private territory. Was it wrong to go around singing other people’s music without their permission?

'What are you singing, Earn?' Dad asked me, catching me serenading Naddalin as I pushed him around the kitchen in his stroller in a vain attempt to get him to nap. But Dad looked delighted. 'My Earn’s singing ‘Waiting for Vengeance’ to my Naddalin.

What do you think about that?'

He leaned over to muss my hair and to tickle Naddalin on his chubby cheek.

'Well, don’t let me stop you. Keep going. I’ll take over this part,' he said, taking the stroller.

9

I felt embarrassed to sing in front of her now, so I just mumbled along, but then Dad joined in and we sang softly together until Naddalin fell asleep. Then he put a finger to his lips and gestured for me to follow him into the living room.

'Want to play some chess?' He asked. He was always trying to teach me

to play, but I thought it was too much work for a game.

'How about checkers?' I asked.

'Sure.'

We played in silence. When it was Dad’s move, I would steal looks at her in his button-down shirt, trying to remember the fast-fading picture of the girl with peroxided hair and a short dress.

'Dad?'

'Hmm.'

'Can I ask you a question?'

'Always.'

'Are you sad that you aren’t in a band anymore?'

'Nope,' she said.

'You do?'

Dad’s gray eyes met mine, and that night we had sex, I and daddy have a special relationship. 'What brought this all on, is that I dropped my bath tow, to see it… and he was into me, and it happened, hole up… bend me in half style, him on top ramming, say I am red-nick it is okay I am some, I love my daddy-that’s all.'

'I was talking to Gramps about us.'

'Not even a little bit more of it do when say, Sh-h-h- and he put his finger to my lips?'

'Oh, I see.'

Dad nodded. 'Gramps thinks that he somehow exerted pressure on me to change my life.'

'Well, did he?'

'I suppose in an indirect way he did. By being who he is, by showing me what a father is.'

'But you were a good dad when you played in a band. The best dad ever. I wouldn’t want you to give that up for me,'

I said, feeling suddenly choked up. 'And I don’t think

Naddalin would, either.'

Dad smiled and patted my hand. 'Earn Oh-My-Uh. I am not giving anything up. It is not an either-or proposition. Teaching or music. Jeans or suits. Music will always be a part of my life.'

'But you quit the band! Gave up dressing punk!'

Dad sighed… 'It wasn’t hard to do.

I had played that part of my life out. It was time. I did not even think twice about it, despite what Gramps or Karrah

might think. Sometimes you make choices in life and sometimes choices make you. Does that make any sense?'

I thought about the French horn. How sometimes I did not understand why I had been drawn to it, how some days it seemed as if the instrument had chosen me. I nodded, smiled, and returned my attention to the game.

'King me,' I said, and then we looked and we did it on the sofa like the night be for yet hard even.

Board games suck when you can suck and get off for more fun… even if… it is the daddy.

Dad sighed…

I sighed…

We have been masturbating together since I was 9, that is when I gave my first blowie, too him.

Standing- This time I am in cling on his body up in the air, he holds me like he did when I was a small girl one leg side to side, and I have my arms around his neck, and my hip tight to his, and we slam…

10

4:59 A.M.

I cannot stop thinking about 'Waiting for Retribution.' It has been years since I have listened to or thought of that song, but after Gramps left my bedside, I have been singing it to myself over and over. Dad wrote the song ages ago, but now it feels like she wrote it yesterday.

Like he wrote it from wherever she is. Like there is a secret message in it for me. How else to explain those lyrics? I am not choosing.

But I am running out of the fight.

I try to think about it from their perspectives. I know they would want to

be with me, for us all to be together again eventually. What does it mean? Is it supposed to be instructional? Some clue about what my parents would choose for me if they could?

But Dad, he understood what it meant to run out of the fight. Ah- Like Gramps, she would understand why I do not think I can stay.

But I have no idea if that even happens after you die, and if it does, it will happen whether I go this morning or in seventy years.

What would they want for me now?

As soon as I pose the question, I can see Mom's pissed-off expression. She would be livid with me for even contemplating anything but staying.

~*~

I am singing, concentrating, singing, and thinking so hard that I barely register Carrie's return to the ICU, barely notice that she is talking to the grumpy nurse, I was being me you know doing what I do all the time all oversexed and all with myself, and wonder if there is a color other than black in this world, barely recognize the sturdy determination in her tone.

I am singing the song as if buried within its lyrics are instructions, a musical road map to where I am supposed to go and how to get there.

Had I been paying attention, I had been paying attention, I might have comprehended that Carrie was lobbying for Beth to be able to visit me., I might have somehow got away before Carrie was-as always-positive.

I do not want to see him now. I mean, of course, I do. I ache too. But I know that if I see him, I am going to lose the last wisp of peacefulness that Gramps gave me when he told me that it was okay

to go. I am trying to summon the courage to do what I must do.

And Beth will complicate things. I try to stand up to get away, but something has happened to me since I went back into surgery. I no longer have the strength to move.

It takes all my effort to sit upright in my chair. I cannot run away; all I can do is hide. I curl my knees into my chest and close my eyes.

I hear Nurse Ramirez talking to Carrie. 'I'll take him over,' she says. And for once, the grumpy nurse does not order her back to her patients.

'That was a pretty boneheaded move you pulled earlier,' I hear her tell Beth.

'I know,' Beth answers. His voice is a throaty whisper, the way it gets after a particularly screamy concert. 'I was desperate.'

'No, you were romantic,' she tells her.

They said she was doing better before. I was idiotic; that she had come off the ventilator. That she was getting stronger. But after I came here that she got worse. They said her heart stopped on the operating table.

Beth trails off.

I am thinking about daddy in knotty was…!

MMMMMMMM! Long-drawn out a

sigh! Of thinking GOD…

11

This kind of thing happens all the time, and it had nothing to do with you. We caught it and fixed it and that’s what matters.' 'And they got it started. She had a perforated bowel that was slowly leaking bile into her abdomen, and it threw her organs out of order.

She is so-o wrong…. SO-o!

'But she was doing better,' Beth whispers. He sounds so young and vulnerable like Naddalin used to sound when he got the stomach flu. 'And then I came in and she almost died.' Her voice chokes into a sob. The sound of it wakes me up like a bucket of ice water dropped down my shirt. Does Beth think that he did this to me? No…! That is beyond ridiculous.

You got to deal with the situation at hand. And she’s still here.' She whips the privacy curtain around my bed. 'If you go,' she tells Beth. 'And I almost stayed in Mexico to marry a fat a b*tch,' the nurse

snaps. 'But I didn’t- yes -ua-h ah… And I have a different life now. It almost does not matter.

She is emergent stubble, enough of it that if we were to make out, it would make my chin raw. He is wearing his typical band uniform of a T-shirt, skinny pants no underwire under, and Converse, with Gramps’s plaid scarf, draped over his shoulders. I force my head up and my eyes open. Beth. God, even in this tale, she is beautiful.

Her eyes are dripping with fatigue.

When he first sees me, he blanches, like I am some hideous Creature from the Black Lagoon. I do look bad, hooked back up to the ventilator and a dozen other tubes, the dressing from my latest surgery seeping Ritalin. But after a moment, Beth exhales loudly, and then she is just Beth again. She searches around like he has dropped something and then finds what he is looking for: my hand.

'Jesus, Earn, your hands are freezing.'

She squats down, takes my right hand into his, and careful not to bump into my tubes and wires, draws his mouth

to them, blowing warm air into the shelter she is created.

'You and your crazy hands.' Beth is always amazed at how even in the middle of summer, even after the sweatiest of encounters, my hands stay cold.

I tell her it is bad circulation, but he does not buy it because my feet are usually warm. He says I have bionic hands, that therefore, like- I am such a good French horn player.

I watch her warm my hands as she has done a thousand times before. I think of the first time he did it, at school,

sitting on the lawn, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

I also remember the first time she did it in front of my parents. Naddalin giggled…

Mom and Dad did not say anything, just exchanged a quick look, something private that passed between them, and then Mom smiled apologetically at us.

We were all sitting on the porch on Christmas Eve, drinking cider. It was freezing outside… Beth grabbed my hands and blew on them.

If I reached out my ghostly hand to his, would he feel me? Would he warm the hands he cannot see?

I wonder if I tried if I could feel him touching me. If I were to lie down on top of myself in the bed, would I become one with my body again? Would I feel him then?

Even though I know, if we touch, a new tug-of-war-one that will be even more painful than the quiet one Beth and I have been waging these past few months-will begin.

Beth drops my hand and steps forward to look at me. She is standing so

close that I can almost smell her, and I am overpowered by the need to touch her. It is basic, primal, and all-overwhelming the way a baby needs its mother's breast and her nipple to suck, these days you do not cover those doing it.

Gram's twitters on for another five minutes, filling me in on the mundane news:

Heather has decided she wants to become a librarian.

My cousin Matthew Black bought a motorcycle and my aunt Patricia is not pleased about that. I have heard her keep

up a running stream of explanation like this for hours while she is cooking dinner or potting orchids. And listening to her now, she calls them and mixes them in with mulch to make her own formally.

Gramps thinks she should patent the recipe and sell it because she uses it on her orchids, which are always winning awards.

I can almost picture us in her glasshouse, where even in winter, the air is always warm and humid and smells musty and earthy like soil with the slightest tinge of manure. Gram’s hand-collects cow-sh*t, 'cow patties,' Sleep would be so welcome. A warm blanket of

black to erase everything else. Sleep without dreams. I have heard people talk about the sleep of the dead. Is that what death would feel like? The nicest, warmest, heaviest never-ending nap? If that is what it is like, I would not mind. If that is what dying is like, I would not mind that at all.

I try to meditate on the sound of Grams' voice, to be carried away by her happy babble. Sometimes I can almost fall asleep while sitting on the barstool at her kitchen counter and listening to her, and I wonder if I could do that here today.

I jerk myself up, a panic destroying whatever calm listening to

Gram's had offered. I am still not entirely clear on the particulars here, but I do know that once I fully commit to going, I will go. Nevertheless, I am not ready.

Not yet.

I do not know why, but I am not. And I am a little scared that if I accidentally think, I will not mind an endless nap, it will happen and be irretrievable, like the way my grandparents used to warn me that if I made a funny face as the clock struck noon, it will remain like that forever.

I wonder if every dying person gets to decide whether they stay or go. It

seems unlikely. This hospital is full of people having poisonous chemicals pumped into their veins or submitting to horrible operations all so they can stay, but some of them will die anyway.

She was scared… why I do not know… I suddenly picture her alone and frightened, and for the first time in my life, I hope that Gibson is right about the angels. I pray they were all too busy comforting Naddalin to worry about me.

I remember feeding her to my breast… She is little…

Did Mom and Dad decide? It hardly seems like there would have been

time for them to make such a weighty decision, and I cannot imagine them choosing to leave me behind. And what about Naddalin? Did he want to go with Mom and Dad? Did he know that I was still here? Even if he did, I would not blame him for choosing to go without me.

Why can’t someone else decide this for me? Why can’t I get a death substitution? Or do what baseball teams do when it is late in the game, and they need a solid batter to bring the girls to the base home? Can’t I have a pinch hitter to take me home?

12

(Back)

Gram’s is gone… Carrie is gone… The ICU is tranquil. I close my eyes. When I open them again, Gramps is there? She is crying. She is not making any noise, but tears are cascading down his cheeks, wetting his entire face.

I have never seen anyone cry like this. Quiet but gushing, a faucet behind his eyes mysteriously turned on. The tears fall onto my blanket, onto my freshly combed hair.

(Plink- Plink- Plink)

Gramps does not wipe his face or blow her nose. She just lets the tears fall

where they may. And when the well of grief is momentarily dry, he steps forward and kisses me on the forehead.

She looks like she is about to leave, but then she doubles back to my bedside, bends so her face is level with my ear, and whispers into it.

'But that’s what I want and I could see why it might not be what you want. So, I just wanted to tell you that I understand if you go. It is okay if you must leave us. It’s okay if you want to stop fighting.'

'It’s okay,' she tells me. 'If you want to go. Everyone wants you to stay. I

want you to stay more than I've ever wanted anything in my life.' Her voice cracks with emotion. She stops, clears her throat, takes a breath, and endures.

For the first time, since, I reanalyzed that Naddalin was gone, too, something unclenches. I feel myself breathe. I know that Gramps cannot be that late-inning pinch hitter I had hoped for. She will not unplug my breathing tube or overdose me with Murphy or anything like that.

But this is the first time today that anyone has acknowledged what I have lost. I know that the social worker warned Gram's and Gramps not to upset

me, but Gramps’s recognition and the permission he just offered me-it feels like a gift.

So, quiet that you can almost hear other people’s dreams. So, quiet that you can almost hear me tell Gramps, 'Thank you.' Gramps do not leave me, even if I am lying here like this. She slumps back into the chair.

It is quiet now.

When Mom had Naddalin, Dad was still playing drums in the same band she had been in since Middle School. They had released a couple of CDs; they had gone on a tour every summer.

The band was by no means big, but they had a following in the Northwest and various middle School towns between here and Chicago. And, weirdly, they had a bunch of fans in China.

The band was always getting letters from Japanese teenagers begging them to come to play and offering up their homes as crash pads. Dad was always saying that if they went, he would take me and Mom. Mom and I even learned a few words of Japanese just in case. Konnichiwa. Rigato. It never panned out, though.

After Mom announced she was pregnant with Naddalin, the first sign that

changes were afoot was when Dad Titus Black got himself a learner's permit. At age thirty-three.

13

She tried letting Mom teach me to drive, even if could not see over the wheel, but she was too impatient, she said. Dad was too sensitive to criticism, Mom said. So, Gramps Titus Sr. took Dad Jr. out along the empty country lanes in his pickup truck, just like she had done with the rest of Dad's siblings-except they would all learn to drive when they were 10 or so.

Black jeans and band tees in exchange for suits. It was subtler. Then the jeans went in the bin, except for one pair of impeccable, dark blue Levi's, which Dad ironed and wore on weekends.

Next up was the wardrobe change, but it was not something any of us noticed right away. It wasn't like one day he stripped off the tight which she drug-up at the Good-Will until they started getting trendy and he had to buy them from the fancy vintage-clothing shop, First, the band tees went out in the window in favor of button-up 1950's rayon numbers.

Most days he wore neat, flat-front cuffed trousers. But when a few weeks after Naddalin was born, Mom gave away her lacey covering-her prized beat-up motorcycle jacket with the fuzzy leopard belt-we finally realized that a major transformation was underway.

'Man, you cannot be serious,' Karrah said when Dad handed her the jacket, saying keep it. 'You've been wearing this thing since you were a kid. It even smells like you.' Dad shrugged, ending the conversation. Then he went to pick up Naddalin, who was squalling from his bassinet.

Mom told him not to do it for her sake. She said it was okay to keep playing if she did not take off on month-long tours, leaving her alone with two kids.

Dad said not to worry, he was not quitting for her. A few months later, Dad publicized she was leaving the band. Do Sinatra covers. Come on, man,' Karrah rational.

Dad’s other bandmates took his decision in stride, but Karrah was devastated.

He tried to talk him out of it.

'We can even start playing shows in suits. We will look like the Rat Pack.

Promised they would only play in town. I would not have to tour. NEVER-Ever be gone overnight.

Karrah was furious with Dad for unilaterally quitting the band, especially since Mom had said he could still play shows. When Dad refused to reconsider, she and Karrah had a huge blowout.

She was going to be a teacher now. No more dicking around. 'One day you'll understand,' Dad told Karrah.

Dad told Karrah that he was sorry, but he had made his decision. By this time, he had already filled out his applications for graduate school.

'The f*ck I will,' Karrah said back fast.

14

'Give her time,' she said, and Daddy would pretend to not be hurt. Then she and Mom would drink coffee in the kitchen and exchange knowing smiles, that seemed to say: girls are such girls.

Karrah did not speak to Dad for a few months after that. Carrie would drop by from time to time, to play peace-maker. She would explain to Dad that Karrah was just sorting some stuff out.

Karrah ultimately and resurfaced, but she did not apologize to Dad, not right

away, anyhow. Years later, shortly after his daughter was born, Karrah called our house one night in tears. 'I get it now,' she told Daddy.

You would have thought he would love the new Dad. Strangely enough, in some ways, Gramps seemed as upset with Dad’s metamorphosis as Karrah had been.

On the surface, he and Gram seem so old-school, it is like a time warp. They do not use computers or watch cable TV, and they never curse and have this thing about them that makes you want to be polite.

Mom, who swore like a prison guard, never- ever cursed around Grams and Gramps.

It was like no one wanted to disappoint them.

Gram’s got a kick out of Dad’s stylistic transformation. 'Had I known that all that stuff was going to come back in style, I would’ve saved Gramps’s old suits,' Gram is said one Sunday afternoon when we’d stopped by for lunch and Dad pulled off a trench coat to reveal a pair of wool gabardine trousers and a 1950’s cardigan.

'Whose daddy’s a rebel? Is your daddy a rebel?' Mom baby-talked as Naddalin gurgled in delight.

'It hasn’t come back into style. Punk has come into style, so-o this is your son’s way of campaigning all over again,' Mom said with a smirk.

'Well, she sure does look dapper,' Gram’s said. 'Don’t you think?' she said, whirling to Gramps.

Gramps shrugged… 'he always looks good to me, all way how could he not? All my children and Gram’s children do, too there no wrong yah can do.' But he looked pained as he said it.

He needed to split some more logs, so I watched him take a hatchet to a bunch of dried alders. Later that afternoon, I went outside with Gramps to help him collect firewood.

'Gramps, don’t you like Dad’s new clothes?' I asked.

Then he set it down gently next to the bench I was sitting on. 'I like his clothes simply fine, Earn,' he said.

Gramps halted the ax in midair. 'But you looked so sad in there when Gram’s was talking about it.' 'It’s not easy to miss. When you feel sad, you look sad.'

Gramps shook his head. 'Don’t miss a thing, do you? Even at ten years old.'

'Music? You never go to Dad’s shows.' 'I’m not sad. Your father seems happy, and I think he will make a good teacher. Those are some lucky kids who get to read 'Haven' with your dad. I’ll just miss the music; he loves and the story of a girl kind of like me.'

'I’ve got bad ears. From the war. The noise hurts.'

He would sit down at his little table and write them down, then give them to Gram’s to type up, then he would draw pictures. I remember all the cute

and funny stories about animals and us when little, but real and smart.

It always reminded me of that book about the wolf and the pig, what's it called?' Mom makes me do that. Earplugs just fall out.' 'You should wear headphones. 'Maybe I'll try that. Nonetheless, I have continually listened to your dad's music, at low volume.

I will admit, I do not much care for all that electric guitar. Not my cup of coffee. But I still admired the music. The words, especially. When he was about your age, your father used to produce these remarkable stories.

''In the Eyes of an Angel?' Beth asked, forgetfully taking my hand in his and blowing on it, which is what he did to warm my continually cold fingers. 'What’s wrong with

‘At the Cross? It’s still traditional…'

'But doesn’t make you want to vomit,'

Karrah interjected. The Doors, adding in… That would have been a more Kerry-worthy song. Something to toast the man he was, the ww2 servicer, of harbor whatever that is, he said yes I don’t care is all in the past now- right?'

It was like they killed him all over again, saying anything about wanting a Toyota.'

'That funeral wasn’t about celebrating Kerry’s life,' Mom howled, yanking at her scarf. 'It was about repudiating it.

Dad put a comforting hand over Mom’s clenched fist. 'Now come on. It was just a song.' 'It was what it represented. That whole charade back there. You of all people should understand.'

'It wasn’t just a song,' Mom said, snatching her hand away. Then, I cannot

be angry with his family. I imagine this funeral was their way of reclaiming their girl.'

Dad shrugged and smiled Galleomily. 'Maybe I should… 'Please,' Mom said, shaking her head. 'If they wanted to claim their son, why didn’t they deference the life he chose to live?

How come they never- ever came to visit? Or supported his music, with me?'

15

'We don’t know what they thought about all that,' Dad replied. 'Let

us not judge too harshly. It has to be heart-breaking to bury your child.'

'I can’t believe you’re making excuses for them,' Mom shouted.

'I’m not. I just think you might be reading too much into a musical assortment.'

'And I think you’re confusing being assumed with being a pushover!'

Dad’s wince was barely visible, but it was enough to make Beth squeeze my hand, and Karrah and Carrie exchange a look. Karrah jumped in, to Dad’s rescue, I think.

'It’s different for you, with your parents,' he told Dad. 'I mean they’re old-fashioned but they always were into what you did, and even in your wildest days, you were always a good son, a good father. Always home for Sunday dinner.'

Mom guffawed as if Karrah’s statement had proven her point. We all turned to her, and our shocked expressions snapped her out of her rant.

'I’m just emotional right now,' she said. Dad comprehended that was as much an apology as he was going to get right now.

She covered her hand with her and this time she did not snatch it away.

You can have your wishes, your plans, but at the end of the day, it’s out of your control.' Dad paused, hesitating before speaking. 'Funerals are a lot like death itself.

'No way,' Karrah said. 'Not if you make your wishes known to the right people.' He turned to Carrie and spoke to the bump in her belly.

~*~

'So, listen up, family. At my funeral, no one is allowed to wear black.

And for music, I want something poppy and old-school, like Mr. T Experience.' she looked up at Carrie. 'Got that'

'Thanks, and what about you, honey?' He asked her.

Without missing a beat, Carrie said: 'Play ‘P.S. ‘If This Was a Movie.’ And I want one of those green funerals where they bury you in the ground under a tree.

So, the funeral itself would be in nature. And no flowers. I mean, give me all the peonies you want when I’m alive, but once I’m dead, better to give

donations on my behalf to a good charity like Doctors Without Borders.'

'You've got all the details figured out,' Beth said. 'Is that a nurse thing?'

Carrie shrugged.

'According to Ana, that means you're deep,' I said. 'She says that the world is divided into the people who imagine their funerals and the people who don't and that smart and artistic people naturally fall into the former category.'

'So, which are you?' Beth asked me.

'I’d want Mozart’s Requiem,' I said. I turned to Mom and Dad. 'Don’t worry, I’m not hopeless or anything.'

My deadbeat father and all the friends who had wronged me would weep over my casket, which would be red, logically, 'Please,' Mom said, her mood lightening as she stirred her coffee. 'When I was growing up, I’d have elaborate fantasies about my funeral.

'Let me guess,' Carrie said. ''Fire and Rain’?'

Mom nodded and she and Carrie started laughing and soon everyone at the table was cracking up so hard that tears

ran down our faces. And then we were crying, even me, who did not know Kerry all that well.

Crying and laughing, laughing, and crying.

'So, what now?' Beth asked Mom when we had calmed down. 'Still harbor a soft spot for Mr. Taylor?'

Mom stopped and blinked hard, which is what she does when she is thinking about something. Then she reached over to stroke Dad’s cheek, a rare demonstration of PDA.

'In my ideal scenario, my bighearted pushover husband and I die

quickly and simultaneously when we're ninety-two years old. I am not sure how.

16

We are on a tropical beach-because, in the future, we are rich; hey, it is my fantasy-and we come down with some exotic illness, of what it hard from her, and go to sleep one night feeling fine and then never wake up, unless it with her in my arms. And no James Taylor. Earn plays at our funeral. If that is, we can tear her away from the New York Philharmonic.'

That said, I cannot help thinking Mom would not be happy about this.

Mama Bear would be furious with the way events are unfolding today.

Dad was wrong about it all; indeed, you might not get to control your funeral, but sometimes you do get to choose your death.

She went with Dad. I cannot help thinking that part of Mom's wish did come true. Nevertheless, I will not be playing at her funeral.

To go down as a family. No one left behind. Her funeral may also be mine. Something is comforting in that.

2:19 A.M.

I am back where I started, going backward they say in my state of mind, and my lusting wants and needs.

I wish there were anesthesia for me or at least something to make the world shut up. Back in the ICU. My body, that is. I have been sitting here all along, too tired to move. I wish I could go to sleep.

I do not want this. I look around the ICU, feeling ridiculous. I doubt all the other messed-up people in the ward are exactly thrilled to be here, either. I do not have the energy for this decision. I do not want this anymore. I say it aloud. I want

to be like my body, quiet and lifeless, putty in someone else's hands.

I reanalyze now that dying is easy, I would rather do that than have lost both my legs and yet it is my felt, self-infiltered harm, at 12, over not having the girlfriend I wanted. The living is hard. My body was not gone from the ICU for too long. I ended my life in my hospital room over I could not handle it, in my mind… yet I going to talk about it…

A few hours for surgery, and now I am just hip and vagina. Sometimes in the recovery room.

I do not know exactly what has happened to me, and for the first time today, I do not care. I should not have to care. I should not have to work this hard.

I am back on the ventilator, and once again there's tape over my eyes. I still do not understand the tape. Are the doctors afraid that I will wake up mid-surgery and be horrified by the scalpels or Ritalin?

As if those things could faze me now.

Two nurses, the one assigned to me and Nurse Ramirez, come over to my bed and check all my monitors.

They call out a chorus of numbers that are as familiar to me now as my name: BP, pulse ox, breathing rate. I was shocked up to all kinds of things and wanted out, my hold body shut down, yet it was all my fault… yet I was mental and sick, so-o- is it all on me? YES-

NO- AH!

Nurse Ramirez looks like an entirely different person from the one who arrived here yesterday afternoon.

I will miss her, but I am glad she will be able to get away from me, from this place. I would like to get away, too.

I think I will. It is just a matter of time figuring out how to let go.

The makeup has all rubbed off and her hair is flat. She looks like she could sleep standing up. Her shift must be over soon, and the sweet cute girl I like would be rubbing me do in a sponge bath- the only good in my life at this time, going back more.

I had not been back in my bed for fifteen minutes when Carrie showed up.

She marches through the double doors and goes to speak to the one nurse behind the desk.

I do not hear what she says, but I hear her tone: it is polite, soft-spoken, but leaving no room for questions.

When she leaves the room a few minutes later, there is a change in the air.

Carrie’s in charge now.

17

Ah, I recall-

The grumpy nurse at first looks pissed off, like Who is this woman to tell me what to do?

I got sick of this life… how could you not when you no more… than they think and they take you for mentally

retarded. Yet that is what materializes to girls like me, that end in a place like this over… well, not handling it. But then she seems to resign, to throw her hands up in surrender. It has been a crazy night. The shift is over. Why bother? Soon, I and all my noisy, pushy visitors will be an important person else's problem. I used to hear Mom give her tips for getting the baby to sleep through the night.

Five minutes later, Carrie is back, bringing Grams and Gramps with her. Carrie has worked all day and now she is here all night. I know she does not get enough sleep on a good day.

It is like exhaustion would not dare mess with her. She stirs right over to my bed, looking at me all vegetated, now in my last days, she remembers the younger me.

I am not sure who looks worse, me or Gramps. His cheeks are sallow, his skin looks gray and papery, and his eyes are Ritalin-shot.

Gram’s, on the other hand, looks just like Grams. No sign of wear and tear on her.

Never the kind of girl to make my heart race in fear. You made up for a lifetime of that today.'

But you proved me wrong. Even-never then you were such a breeze. Never-ever gave us any trouble.

'You've sure got us on a roller-coaster ride today,' Gram says lightly. 'Your mom always said she couldn't believe what an easy girl you were and I remember telling her, 'Just wait until she hits puberty.'

'Now, now,' Gramps says, putting a hand on her shoulder.

'Oh, I'm only kidding. Earn would appreciate it. She has a sense of humor, no matter how serious she sometimes

seems. A wicked sense of humor, this one.'

'There, much better,' she says. 'You know, I went outside for a walk today and you'll never guess what I saw. A crossbill. In Dauphin Main in March. Now, that is unusual.

It is Galle…

Someone has rinsed it out, so, while it is not exactly clean, it is not caked with Ritalin, either. Gram's starts untangling my bangs, which are about chin length. Gram's pulls the chair up next to my bed and starts combing through my hair with her fingers.

She works her way down, pulling the hair out from under the pillow so it streams down my chest, hiding some of the lines and tubes connected to me. I am forever cutting bangs, then growing them. It is about as radical a makeover as I can give myself.

You would think she would be there my last days at my bed, yet she was not, she did not care… or so that how I remember it… yet, I lost my health for her.

18

She always had a soft spot for you. Said you reminded her of your father, and she adored her.

But she loved that she had rebelled against us, or so she thought, and she thought it was something that you rebelled all over again by becoming a classical musician.

Though much as I tried to tell her that it was not the way it was, she did not care. She had her ideas about things; I suppose we all do.'

Little did she know your father could not stand her. When he cut his first

crazy hairdo, she practically threw him a party.

She loved that he was rebellious, so dissimilar then us all in the world today.

She came to visit us once when your daddy was around five or six, and she had this ratty mink coat with her.

This was before she got all into animal rights and crystals and the like. The coat smelled terrible, like mothballs, like the old linens we kept in a trunk in the attic, and your father took to calling her ‘Auntie Shaft Smell.’ She never knew that.

I know that all the magic kisses in the world could not have helped him today. But I would do anything to have been able to give her one.

10:41 P.M.

I run away, once from this place and was in trouble back when I still had legs, this place is why… and she… too. I was slowly dying anyway with MS, so-o… that was what they said it was too…

I leave Beth, Ana, and Carrie in the lobby and I just start careening through the hospital. I did not realize I was looking for the pediatric ward until I got there.

Past the pediatric oncology unit where bald cancer patients sleep under cheerful murals of rainbows and balloons, I tear through the halls…

Like past rooms with nervous four-year-old's sleeping restlessly before tomorrow's tonsillectomies, past the newborn ICU with babies the size of fists, hooked up to more tubes than I am.

I am looking for him, even though I know I will not find him. Still, I must keep looking.

I picture his head, his tight blond curls. I love to nuzzle my face in those curls, have done since he was a baby. I

kept waiting for the day when he would swat me away, say 'You’re embarrassing me,' the way he does to Dad when Dad cheers too loudly at T-ball games. But so far, that has not happened. So far, I have been allowed constant access to that head of his. So far. Now there is no more so far. It is over.

I picture myself nuzzling his head one last time, and I cannot even imagine it without seeing myself crying, my tears turning his blond curlicues straight.

I cannot scream until my throat hurts or break a window with my fist until my hand bleeds, or pull my hair out in

clumps until the pain in my scalp overcomes the one in my heart.

Naddalin is never going to graduate from T-ball to baseball. she is never going to grow a mustache. Never-ever going to get into a fistfight or shoot a deer, kiss a girl, have real sex, fall in love, or get married or mother her curly-haired girl that she wanted back before she could talk, or walk even, even if she had one dropped in the crapper that was her daddy's when she aborted it with pills.

I am only 1 year older than her, but it is like I have already had so much more life. It is unfair. If one of us should have been left behind, if one of us should

be given the opportunity for more life, it should be her. I race through the hospital like a trapped wild animal. Naddalin? I call. Where are you? Come back to me!

I do not want to be here. I do not want to be in this hospital. I do not want to be in this suspended state where I can see what is happening, where I am aware of what I am feeling without being able to feel it.

Nevertheless, she will not. I know it is fruitless. I give up and drag myself back to my ICU. I want to break the double doors. I want to smash the nurses' station. I want to go away. I want it all to go away.

I am staring at myself, at the 'live' Earn now, lying in her hospital bed. I feel a burst of fury. If I could slap my lifeless face, I would.

Instead, I sit down in the chair and close my eyes, wishing it all away. Except I cannot. I cannot concentrate because there is suddenly so much noise. My monitors are blipping and chirping and two nurses are racing toward me.

'Her BP and pulse ox are dropping,' one screams.

'She’s tachycardia,' the other yells. 'What transpired?'

'Code blue, code blue in Trauma,' blares the PA. (that was the night I passed, at 12, the day before I became a teen girl, holding a stuffed toady bear, he was being a suit.) I am naked from the waist down, but no one notices these things here.

Soon the nurses are joined by a bleary-eyed doctor, the one that was so in love with me, the real me or so she said, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes, which are ringed by deep circles. He yanks down the covers and lifts my hospital gown.

He puts his hands on my belly, which is swollen and hard. His eyes widen

and then narrow into slits. 'Abdomen’s rigid,' he says angrily. 'We need to do an ultrasound.'

Nurse Ramirez runs to a back room and then wheels out what looks like a portable laptop with a long white attachment. She squirts some jelly on my stomach, and the doctor runs the attachment over my stomach.

'Damn. Full of fluid,' he says.

'Patient, had surgery this afternoon?'

'A splenectomy,' Nurse Ramirez replies.

'Could be a missed Ritalin vessel that wasn’t sealed,' the doctor says, she tried this one before. I do not think this was natural… 'Or a slow leak from a perforated bowel.

Car accident, right?'

That was more of a thing than me taking last breath… yet it was 18 months (about 1 and a half years) … and my funding was running out so-o let her go-o is what they do; this place is like a nearing home… I have seen it all before. It is small the same. Like piss, looks the same, like death, and then that all the is left is regretting all and both.

Those things that thing and them too.

'Yes, the patient was med-evaded this morning.'

The doctor flips through my chart. 'Doctor Sorensen was her surgeon; he’s still on call. Page him, get her to the OR.

Nurse Ramirez shoots the doctor a dirty look as if he had just insulted me.

We need to get inside and find out what’s leaking, and why, before she drops any further. Jesus, brain contusions, collapsed a lung. This kid’s a train wreck.'

20

'Miss Ramirez,' the grumpy nurse at the desk scolds. 'You have patients of your own to deal with. Let us get this young woman intubated and transferred to the OR. That will do her better than all this dilly-dallying around!'

The nurses work rapidly to detach the monitors and catheters and run another tube down my throat. A pair of orderlies’ rushes in with a gurney and heave me onto it. She taps me three times on the forehead with her fingers, like it is Morse code message. And then I am gone into the maze of hallways leading toward the OR for another round of cutting, but

this time I do not follow myself. This time I stay behind in the ICU.

~*~

I am still naked, from the waist down as they hustle me out, showing my vagina-ie-slit. And the line of hair I have down there left, but right before I reach the back door, Nurse Ramirez calls, 'Wait!' and then gently closes the hospital gown around my legs. This morning I went for a drive with my family. And now I am here, as alone as I have ever been. I am seventeen years old. This is not how it is supposed to be. This is not how my life is supposed to turn out.

I am starting to get it now. I mean, I do not fully understand. It is not like I somehow commanded a Ritalin vessel to pop open and start leaking into my stomach. It is not like I wished for another surgery. But Naddalin is gone. Mom and Dad are gone. To never-ever smell Dad smoke a pipe? To never stand next to Mom quietly talking as we do the dishes? To never read Naddalin another chapter of Neveah, even if she cannot put it down- and there are no other books out there to read; to stay without them? I am not sure this is a world I belong to anymore. I am not sure that I want to wake up. In the quiet corner of the ICU, I

start to think about the bitter things I have managed to ignore so far today. What would it be like if I stay? What would it feel like to wake up an orphan?

I have only ever been to one funeral in my life, and it was for someone I hardly knew. Grams was annoyed by that, by Aunt Galle in general, who Gram's said was always trying to call attention to how different she was, even after she was dead. Grams ended up boycotting the ash scattering, and if she was not going, there was no reason for the rest of us too. No traditional service, no burial in the family plot. Instead, she wanted to be cremated and have her

ashes scattered in a sacred Native American ceremony somewhere in the Sierra Mountains in Nevada. I might have gone to Great-Aunt Galle's funeral after she died of acute pancreatitis. Except her will was specific about her final wishes.

That was the funny thing about conservatory camp; you got so close with the people over the summer, but it was some unwritten rule that you did not stay connected during the rest of the year. We were summer friends. Anyhow, we had a memorial concert at camp in Dick's honor, but it was not a funeral. Dick Mize, my trombonist friend from conservatory camp, died two years ago, but I did not

find out until I returned to camp, and he was not there. Few of us had known that he had had lymphoma.

Unlike Dad and Karrah, who as they got older and had families became fewer music performers than music connoisseurs. Kerry Whiteford was a musician in town, one of

Mom and Dad's people, Kerry stayed single and stayed faithful to his first love: playing music.

She was in three bands, and she earned her living to do the sound at a local club, an ideal setup because at least one of his bands seemed to play there

every week, though sometimes you would see her jumping down in the middle of a set to adjust the monitors herself, so she just had to hop up on the stage and let someone take the controls for his set. I had known Kerry when I was little and would go to shows with Mom and Dad and then I sort of remit- her when Beth, and I got together and I started going to shows again. Kerry's death caused an uproar in our town. She was kind of a fixture around here, an outspoken girl with a big personality and this mass of wild white-girl curly-locks.

She was at work one night, doing the sound for a Dauphin band called Clod

when he just keeled over on the soundboard. He was dead by the time the ambulance got there. A freak brain aneurysm. Mom and Dad were going, of course, and so was Beth. So-o even though I felt a little bit like an impostor crashing someone's death day, I decided to go along. Naddalin stayed with Grams and Gramps Black. And she was young, only thirty-two. Everyone we knew was planning to go to her funeral, which was being held in the town where he grew up, in the mountains a couple of hours' drive away.

~*~

Kerry the avowed left-winger who decided to protest the Iraq war by getting a bunch of men to dress up in drag and go down to the local army recruiting office to enlist.

Kerry the atheist curmudgeon, hated how commercial May Christmas had become and so-o threw an annual Merry Anti-Christmas Celebration at the club, where he held a contest for which band could play the most distorted versions of Christmas carols.

Then he invited everyone to throw all their crappy presents into a big pile in the middle of the club. And contrary to local lore, Kerry did not burn

the stuff in a bonfire; Dad told me that he donated it to St. Vincent de Paul. As everyone talked about Kerry, the mood in the car was fizzy and fun, like we were going to the circus, not a funeral. But it seemed right, it seemed true to Kerry, who was always overflowing with frenetic energy.

We caravanned to Kerry's hometown with a bunch of people, squeezing into a car with Karrah and Carrie, who was so pregnant the seat belt would not fit over her bump. Everyone took turns telling funny stories about Kerry. The problem was the service itself. It was obvious that the pastor had never

even met Kerry because when he talked about him, it was generic, about what a kind heart Kerry had and how even though it was sad that he was gone, he was getting his 'heavenly reward.'

I cannot say I feel that way, a man was on a cross for me that good right… I do not have to feel I did anything wrong, for that way he did what he did… or was chosen… right? The funeral, though, was the opposite. It was horribly depressing and not just because it was for someone who had died tragically young and for no reason aside from some bad arterial luck. It was held in a huge church, which seemed strange

considering Kerry was an out-spoken nonbeliever, but that part I could understand. I mean where else do you have a funeral?

We went to church sometimes, so it is not like Mom had anything against religion, but Kerry did, and Mom was ferociously protective of the people she loved, so much that she took insults upon them. Her friends sometimes called her Mama Bear for this reason. Steam was practically blowing out of Mom’s ears by the time the service ended with a rousing rendition of Sarah McLachlan’s’ In the Arms of an Angel.'

And instead of having eulogies from his bandmates or the people in town who she had spent the last fifteen years with, some uncle from Boise got up and talked about teaching Kerry how to ride a bike when he was six, like learning to ride a bike was the defining moment in Kerry's life. He concluded by reassuring us that Kerry was walking with Jesus now. I could see my mom getting red when he said that, and I started to get a little worried that she might say something.

'It's a good thing Kerry's dead because that funeral would've sent him over the edge,' Karrah said. After the church service, we had decided to skip

the formal luncheon and had gone to dinner. Ana, who has met Carrie twice, flings herself into her arms. 'Thank you!' she murmurs into her neck.

~*~

'I want to see Earn,' Beth says… Carrie hugs her back, pats her on the shoulders before letting go. She rubs her eyes and winces out a brittle laugh. 'What in the hell were you two thinking?' she asks. 'Are you okay?' Ana asks. Carrie turns to look at Beth and it is like someone has unscrewed her valve, letting all her air escape. She deflates. She reaches out and touches Beth’s cheek. 'Of course, you do.' She wipes her eyes with

the heel of her hand. Beth perks up when he hears this. 'You think you can? That old nurse has it in for me.' Carrie ignores the question altogether. 'Let us see about getting you in to Earn.'

She needs you now- more than ever... right?' 'If that old nurse is who she is, it doesn’t matter if she has it in for you. It is not up to her. Let us check in with Earn’s Gram’s parents and then I will find out who oversees breaking the rules around here and get you in to see your girl.

Carrie to the rescue. Just the way she rescued Karrah, Dad’s best friend, and bandmate, who, once upon a time,

was a drunk heartbreaker. When he and Carrie had been dating a few weeks, she told her to straighten out and dry out or say good-bye. Beth swivels around and hugs Carrie with such force that her feet lift off the ground.

While Dad lived for the Ramones and thought baseball was a religious institution, and why she was one of Dad's favorite people, even though she hated the Ramones and thought baseball was boring, Dad said, that lots of girls had given Karrah stipulations, tried to force her to settle down, and lots of girls had been left crying on the sidewalk.

But when Carrie packed her toothbrush and told Karrah to grow up, Karrah was the one who cried. Then he dried his tears, grew up, got sober and monogamous. Eight years later, here they are, with a baby, no less. Carrie is formidable that way. Probably- why after she and Karrah got together she became Mom's best friend; she was another tough-as-nails, tender-as-kittens, feminist bitch.

I am so busy celebrating Carrie's arrival that the implication of her being here takes a few moments to sink in, but when it does, it hits me like a jolt of electricity. Now Carrie is here, Carrie the

nurse, Carrie who does not take no for an answer is here. She will get Beth in to see me. She will take care of everything.

Hooray! I want to shout.

Carrie is here! Her eyes got bright…

Carrie is here, and if she is here if she is in my hospital, it means that there is not any reason for her to be in her hospital. I know her well enough to know that she never-ever would have left her there. Even with me here, she would have stayed with her. she was broken and brought to her for adhesive. She was her patient, her priority, and now even a

friend, and someone more than just a patient.

More than ever… I think about the fact that Gram's and Gramps are in Dauphin with me. And that all anyone in that waiting room is talking about is me, how they are avoiding mentioning Mom or Dad or Naddalin. I think about Carrie's face, which looks like it has been scrubbed clean of all joy. And I think about what she told Beth, that I need him now.

Mom went into labor three days before Christmas, and she insisted we go holiday shopping together, and that is how I know. Naddalin; She is gone, too.

'Shouldn’t you like lying down or go to the birthing center or something?' I asked. Mom grimaced through a cramp. 'Nah. The contractions are not that bad and are still like twenty minutes apart. I cleaned our entire house, from top to bottom, while I was in early labor with you.'

'You’re a smart-ass, you know that?' Mom said. She took a few breaths. 'I’ve got some ways to go. Now come on. Let us take the bus to the mall. I’m not up to driving.' 'Putting the labor in labor,' I joked. Mom laughed at that. 'Please, it’s enough for me to have to birth this baby. I do not need to deal with her, too. We will call her when I am ready to pop. I’d much

rather have you around.' 'Shouldn’t we call Dad?' I asked.

'Let us get the pie…' So, Mom and I wandered around the mall, stopping every couple minute or so she could sit down and take deep breaths and squeeze my wrist so hard it left angry red marks. Still, it was a weirdly fun and productive morning. We bought presents for Grams and Gramps.

Usually, we waited for the holiday sales to buy stuff like that, but Mom said that this year we would be too busy changing diapers. (A sweater with an angel on it and a new book about Abraham Lincoln,) and toys for the baby

and a new pair of rain boots for me. Now's not the time to be cheap. Ow, freak. Sorry, Earn.

Come on.

The hippie midwife-led Mom inside and Dad asked me if I wanted to come, too. By now, I could hear Mom screaming profanities. We went to Marie Callender's. Mom had a slice of pumpkin and banana cream. I had blueberry… When she was done, she pushed her plate away and announced she was ready to go to the midwife. We had never really talked about my being there or not being there. I went everywhere with Mom and Dad at that point, so it was just assumed.

-And-

We met a nerve-wracked Dad at the birthing center, which was nothing like a doctor’s office. It was the ground floor of a house, the inside decked out with beds and Jacuzzi tubs, the medical equipment discreetly tucked away.

I shook my head. Mom needed me. She had said so. I sat down on one of the floral couches and picked up a magazine with a goofy-looking bald baby on the cover. Dad disappeared into the room with the bed.

'I can call Gram’s and she’ll pick you up,' Dad said, wincing at Mom’s barrage. 'This might take a while.'

~*~

'We have some lovely Enya. Very soothing,' the midwife said. Women can handle the worst kind of pain. You will find out one day. Then she would scream freaking again. 'Music! dammit! Music!' Mom screamed. 'Freaking Enya!' Mom screamed. 'Melvin’s… Earth… now…!' 'I’ve got it covered,' Dad said. Then he popped a CD of the loudest, churning, guitar-heaviest music, like- like, I had ever heard. It made all the fast-paced

punk songs Dad normally listened to sound like harp music.

This music was primal and that seemed to make Mom feel better. She started making these low guttural noises. I just sat there quietly. Every so often she would scream my name and I would scamper inside. Mom would look up at me, her face plastered with sweat. Do not be scared, she would whisper.

Likewise, I had seen a couple of births on that cable-TV show, and people usually yelled for a while; sometimes they swore, and it had to be bleeped, but it never took longer than half an hour. After three hours, Mom and the Melvin's were

still screaming along. The whole birthing center felt tropically humid, even though it was forty degrees outside.

~*~

Karrah quickly visited. When he came inside and heard the noise, she froze in his tracks. I knew that the whole kid-thing freaked him out. I had overheard Mom and Dad talking about that, and Karrah's refusal to grow up. He had been shocked when Mom and Dad had me and now was completely bewildered that they chose to have a second. They would both been relieved when he and Carrie had gotten back

together. 'Finally, a grown-up in Karrah’s life,' Mom had said.

Karrah looked at me; his face was pale and sweaty. ''Holy Shit PISS!!!' Should you be hearing this? Should I be hearing this?'

'I’ve got the flu or something, but your Dad just called asking me to bring some food. I shrugged, Karrah sat down next to me. So here I am,' he said, proffering a Taco Bell bag reeking of onions. I’s let out another moan. 'I should go. Don’t want me spreading germs or anything.'

She stood up to leave, I screamed even louder and Karrah nearly jumped in her seat. 'You sure you want to hang around for this? You can come back to my place. Carrie’s there, taking care of me.' He grinned when he mentioned her name. 'She can take care of you, too.' 'Did she vomit yet?' Karrah asked, sitting back down on the couch. I snickered, but then saw from his face that he was serious. 'No, I’m fine, Mom needs me; Dad’s kind of freaked out, though.'

'So, the story goes. But I’ll tell you this: She cried like a mother freaking baby when you were born.' Almost fainted on the floor. Not that I can blame him.

But the man was a mess, the doctors wanted to kick her out, 'she threw up when you were coming, said they were going to if you didn’t come out within a half-hour. That got your mom so pissed off she pushed you out five minutes later.' Karrah smiled, leaning back into the futon.

~*~

'I’ve heard that part.' 'Heard what part?' Dad asked breathlessly. He grabbed the bag from Karrah. 'Taco Bell, Karrah?' I shook my head; Dad had started unwrapping her meal when Mom let out a growl and then started screaming at the midwife that she was

ready to push. Karrah winked at me, Dad pulled out a burrito and offered one to me.

'Dinner of champions,' Karrah said.

'It’ll do… I am ravenous. It is intense there. Got to keep up my strength.' The midwife poked her head out the door. 'I think we’re getting close, so maybe you should save dinner for later,' she said. 'Come on back.'

21

'Would you like to watch?' The midwife asked Dad, but he just swayed and turned a pale shade of green. Karrah

nearly bolted out the front door. I followed Dad into the bedroom where Mom was sitting now, panting like a sick dog. 'I’m probably better up here,' he said, grasping Mom’s hand, which she violently shook off.

The midwife was telling me to push I was having daddy baby girl, then hold, then push. 'Go, baby, go, baby, go baby go,' she chanted. 'You’re almost there!' she cheered. Mom looked like she wanted to smack her.

No one asked me if I wanted to watch. I just automatically went to stand next to the midwife. It was gross, I will admit, Lots of Ritalin, I was on during.

And I had certainly never seen myself so full-on frontal before. Nevertheless, it felt strangely normal for me to be there. Her eyes were open, staring straight at me. She likes to hold my gaze as the midwife suctioned out her nose, and mouth, and said Well she going to be cheap you do not have to cut anything off. 'It’s a girl,' she shouted. Therefore, girls are E_Z!

'I’ll do it,' I offered.

The midwife put Naddalin on my belly.

'Do you want to cut the cord?' she asked Daddy he was holding my hand the

whole time and kissing my forehead and even my lips. Dad waved his hands no, too overcome, or queasy, woozy to speak. When Naddalin slid out, he was head up, facing the ceiling, so that the first thing he saw was me. She did not come out squalling as you see on TV. She was just noiseless. Up till now, some thought this was wrong yet others not, in the hospital, about me and my daddy. We have a special bond that is all I say and smile nod. The midwife held the cord taut and told me where to cut. Naddalin lay still, his gray eyes wide open, still staring at me. 'Imprinting on a zoologist, not the mama goose, because he was the first

one, they saw when they hatched.' I always said that it was because Naddalin saw me first and because I cut her cord, that somewhere deep down he thought I was his mother. 'It’s like those goslings,' Mom joked, saying, I knew you too would do this... I knew.

When he was a baby and going through his nightly fussy period, she would only calm down after I played him a lullaby on my French horn. When he started getting into Neveah, only I could read a chapter to him every night.

And when he skinned a knee or bumped his head, if I were around, he would not stop crying until I bestowed a

magic kiss on the injury, after which he would miraculously recover. She exaggerated. Naddalin did not think I was her mother, but there were certain things that only I could do for her.

'Damn…' 'You are the plan,

Brooke licks her bee-stung lips, I hadn’t thought beyond you going up to the ICU and making a ruckus.' 'Making a ruckus is one of my favorite things to do. What do you think we should do? Let out a primal scream? Strip? Wait, I did not bring my guitar, I want to play for the baby. Smash a guitar, you mean, said Mom? 'You could sing something?' someone suggests. Beth blanches at this sudden reality check and

Brooke raises her eyebrows in a stern rebuke. Every person goes solemn. 'How about that old Smiths song ‘Girlfriend in a Coma’?'

Someone calls…

That might do it if it does not, then sing. All we want is to lure a couple of curious nurses out, and that grouchy head nurse after them. Once she comes out of the ICU and sees all of us in the hall, she’ll be too busy dealing with us to notice that Beth has slipped inside.'

Brooke appraises Ana; Ana in her rumpled black pants and unflattering sweater. Then Brooke smiles and links

arms with my best friend. 'Sounds like a plan, let us motor, kids.' Ana clears her throat. 'Um, it doesn’t do us any good if Brooke is a diversion in the lobby. We need to go upstairs to the ICU and then maybe someone could shout that Brooke Bogel is here.

All hospitals should import groups of rabble-rousing punk rockers to kickstart the languishing patients’ hearts. I lag, watching this procession of hipster’s barrel through the lobby. I wonder if I will be able to feel his touch on me. While they wait at the elevator banks, I scramble up the stairs.

The sheer noisiness of them, of their heavy boots, and loud voices, buzzed on by their sense of urgency, ricochets through the quiet hush of the hospital and breathes some life into the place.

I, myself recollect watching a TV program once about old-age homes that brought in cats and dogs to cheer the elderly and dying patients, and then stop in front of the elevator, waiting limitlessly for one empty enough to ferry them up as a group. I choose what I want to be next to my body when Beth makes it to the ICU.

22

A gunshot wound… We get a lot of hunting accidents around here.

One of the other patients, one who was so swaddled in gauze and bandages, that I could not see if it were a person, is gone. I’s did not look for the dick- sorry!

I’s have been gone from the ICU for more than three hours, and a lot has different.

In its place is a woman whose neck is immunized in one of those collar things.

There is a new patient in one of the empty beds, a middle-aged staff

whose face looks like one of those surrealist watercolors: half of it looks normal, handsome even, the other half is a mess of bloody-ness, gauze, and stitching like someone just blew it off.

I stop to check if I feel any different, but I do not feel anything, not physically anyhow. I have not since I was in the car this morning, listening to Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3.

Now that I am breathing on my own, my wall of machines bleeps far less, so I get fewer visits from the nurses.

Nurse Ramirez, the one with the nails, expressions a look over at me now

and again, but she is busy with the new guy with the half face. 'Holy crud. Is that Brooke Bogel?'

I hear someone ask in a flakey melodramatic voice from outside the ICU’s automatic doors. I have never heard any of Beth’s friends talk so PG-13 before. It is their sanitized hospital version of 'holy freaking shit.'

As for me, I am off my ventilator now. I remember the social worker telling my Grandparents and Aunt Diane that this was a positive step.

'You mean Brooke Bogel of Bikini?

Brooke Bogel, who was on the cover of Spin magazine last month?

Here in this very hospital?' This time it is Ana talking.

Does she sound like a six-year-old reciting line from a school play about the food groups: You mean you are supposed to eat five servings of fruit and vegetables a day?

I hear them muttering, eager to see if it is Brooke, or simply happy for the break in the routine. 'Yes, that’s right,' says Brooke’s raspy voice. 'I’m here to offer some rock-and-roll succor to all the

people of Rockville and around the county of Dauphin.'

A couple of the younger nurses, the ones who listen to the pop radio or watch MTV and have heard of Bikini, look up, their faces excited question marks.

'Yes. That is right. So, I thought I might sing a little song. One of my favorites. It’s called ‘Eraser,’' Brooke says. 'One of you guys want to count me in?'

'I need something to tap with,' Maylie answers. 'Anyone got some pens or something?' I am watching it all play out, like a movie on the screen.

Now the nurses and orderlies in the ICU are very curious and heading toward the doors.

I stand next to my bed, my eyes trained on the double doors, waiting for them to open. I am itching with suspense.

I think of Beth, of how calming it feels when he touches me, how when he absentmindedly strokes the nape of my neck or blows warm air on my cold hands, I could melt into a puddle.

'What’s going on?' the older nurse demands. Suddenly every nurse on the floor is looking at her, not out toward Brooke anymore.

No one is going to try to explain to her that a famous pop star is outside. The moment has broken. I feel the tension ease into disappointment.

The door is not going to open.

Outside, I hear Brooke start belting out the lyrics to 'Eraser.' Even a cappella, even though the automatic double doors, she sounds good.

'Somebody calls security now,' the nurse growls.

'Beth, you better just go for it,' Maylie screams. 'Now or never. Full-court press.'

23

'Go!' screams Ana, suddenly an army general. 'We'll cover you.'

The door opens. In tumble, more than a half-dozen punkers, Beth, Maylie, Jodi, some people I do not know, and then Ana. Outside, Brooke is still singing, as though this were the concert, she had come to Dauphin and its towns to give.

As Beth and Ana charge through the door, they both look strong-minded, happy even.

I am astonished by their resilience, by their hidden pockets of strength.

I want to jump up and down and root for them like I used to do at Naddalin's T-ball games when she would be circumnavigating third and heading for home.

It is hard to believe, but watching Ana and Beth in action, I almost feel happy, too.

~*~

'Where is she?' Beth yells. 'Where's Earn?'

~*~

'In the corner, next to the supply closet!' Someone shouts- like OMG-ing

freaking load. It takes me a minute to reanalyze its Nurse Ramirez.

~*~

'Security…! Get her…! Get her…!' the grumpy nurse shouts.

'Man, was that Brooke Bogel?' one asks as he snags Jodi and flings her toward the exit.

She has spotted Beth through all the other invaders and her face has gone pink with anger.

Two hospital security guards and two orderlies run inside.

~*~

'Think so,' the other answers, grabbing Sarah and steering her out.

~*~

Ana has spotted me. 'Beth, she’s here!' She freaking screams- like a freak, and then turns to look at me, the scream dying in her throat.

'She’s here,' she says again, only this time it is a whimper.

~*~

Beth hears her and she is dodging nurses and making her way to me, and then she is there at the foot of my bed, her hand reaching out to touch me; her hands about to be on me.

Unexpectedly, I’s think of our first kiss after the gig, how I did not know how badly I had wanted his lips on mine until the kiss was looming.

I did not reanalyze like, um- just how much I was craving his touch, until now that I can almost feel it on me.

… Almost…!

Suddenly, she is moving away from me.

Two guards have him by the shoulders and have yanked her butt. One of the same guards' grabs Ana’s elbow and leads her out.

She is limping now, offering no resistance.

Or get detained…' And then she is off down the hall, trailed by a couple of orderlies begging for her autograph… Brooke is still singing in the hallway.

When she sees Beth, she stops. 'Sorry, honey,' she says. 'I got to jet before I miss my show…

'Call the police,' the old nurse yells.

'Have her arrested- do it.'

'We’re taking him down to security.

That is the protocol,' one guard says.

'Not up to us to arrest,' the other adds.

'Just get her off my ward.' She harrumphs and turns around.

'Miss Ramirez, that had better not have been you abetting these hoodlums.' 'Unquestionably, not, I’s was in the supply closet. I missed all the hullabaloo’s,' she replies.

She is such a good liar that her face gives nothing away.

The old nurse claps her hands. 'Okay. The show’s over, um yes it’s like going back to that place.'

24

I chase after Beth and Ana, who are being led into the elevators.

I jump in with them. Ana looks confused like someone flipped her reset button and she is still booting up.

Beth’s lips are set in a grim line.

I cannot tell if he is about to cry or about to punch the guard. For her sake, I hope it is the former. For my own, I hope the latter.

Downstairs, the guards hustle Beth, and Ana toward a hallway filled with darkened offices.

They are about to go inside one of the few offices with lights on when I hear someone scream Beth’s name. 'Beth. Stop. Is that you?' 'Carrie?' Beth yells.

'Carrie?' Ana mutters.

'Excuse me, where are you taking them?' Carrie yells at the guards as she runs toward them.

'I’m sorry but these two were caught trying to break into the ICU,' one guard elucidates.

'Only because, like- they wouldn’t let us in,' Ana explains inadequately.

Carrie catches up to them. She is still wearing her nursing clothes, which is strange because she normally changes out of what she calls 'orthopedic couture' as soon as she can.

Her long, curly auburn hair looks lank and greasy like she has forgotten to wash it these past few weeks. And her cheeks, normally rosy like apples, have been repainted beige. 'Excuse me...'

'Who’s she?' One guard asks.

I am a patent over at Cedar Creek. I did my training here, so if you

like we can go straighten this out with Dick Caruthers.'

'Director of community affairs,' the other replies. Then he turns to Carrie. 'She’s not here. It’s not business hours.'

'Well, I have his home number,' Carrie says, brandishing her cell phone like a weapon.

'I doubt he’d be pleased if I were to call her now and tell her how his hospital was treating someone trying to visit his critically wounded girlfriend.

You know that the director values compassion as much as efficiency, and

this is not the way to treat a concerned loved one.'

'We’re just doing our job, ma’am.

Following orders.'

25

'How about I save you two the trouble and take it from here. The patient’s family is all assembled upstairs. They are waiting for these two to join them. Here, if you have any problems, you tell Mr. Caruthers to contact me.' She reaches into her bag and pulls out a card and hands it over. One of the guards looks at it, hands it to the other, who stares at it and shrugs.

'Might as well save ourselves the paperwork,' he says. He lets go of Beth, whose body slumps like a scarecrow taken off his pole. 'Sorry, kid,' he says to Beth, brushing off his shoulders.

'I hope your girlfriend’s okay,' the other mumbles. And then they disappear toward the Gallow of some vending machines.

I stared miserably at my plate, looking out at the Galleomy gray evening. I already missed my parents, Ana, and especially Naddalin. He was at that fun stage, wanting to try new things and constantly asking 'What’s that?' and saying the most hilarious things. The day

before I left, he informed me that he was 'nine-tenths thirsty' and I almost peed myself laughing. Homesick, I sighed and moved the mass of meatloaf around my plate.

'Don’t worry, it doesn’t rain every day.

Just every other day.'

I looked up. There was an impish kid who could not have been more than ten years old. He had a blond buzz cut and a constellation of freckles falling down his nose.

'I know,' I said. 'I’m from the Northwest, though it was sunny where I

lived this morning. It’s the meatloaf I’m worried about.'

He laughed. 'That doesn’t get better. But the peanut-butter-and-jelly is always good,' he said, gesturing to a table where a half-dozen kids were fixing themselves sandwiches. 'Dick. Trombone. Ontario,' he said. This, I would learn, was a standard Naddalin’s greeting.

'Oh, hey. I am Earn. French horn.

Oregon, I guess.'

Dick told me that he was thirteen, and this was his second summer here; almost everyone started when they were twelve, which is why they all knew one

another. Of the fifty students, about half did jazz, the other half classical, so it was a small crew. There were only two other French horn players, one of them a tall lanky red-haired guy named Simon who Dick waved over.

'Will you be trying for the concerto competition?' Simon asked me as soon as Dick introduced me to Earn. French horn. Oregon.

Simon was Simon. French horn. Leicester, which turned out to be a city in England. It was quite an international group.

'I don’t think so. I don’t even know what that is,' I answered.

'Well, you know how we all perform in an orchestra for the final symphony?' Dick asked me.

I nodded my head, though really- I had only a vague idea. Dad had spent the spring reading aloud from the camp’s literature, but the only thing I had cared about was that I was going to camp with other classical musicians. I had not paid too much attention to the details.

'It’s the summer’s end symphony. People from all over come to it. It is quite a big deal. We, the youngster musicians,

play as a sort of cute sideshow,' Simon explained. 'However, one musician from the camp is chosen to play with the professional orchestra and to perform a solo movement. I came close last year but it went to a flutist. This is my second-to-last chance before I graduate. It has not gone to strings in a while, and Tracy, the third of our little trio here, is not trying out. She is more of a hobby player. Good but not serious. I heard you were serious.' Was I? Not so serious that I had not been on the verge of quitting. 'How'd you hear that?' I asked.

'The teachers hear all the application reels and word gets around.

Your audition tape was quite good. It is unusual to admit someone in year two. So, I was hoping for some Ritalin good competition, to up my game, as it were.'

'Whoa, give the girl a chance,' Dick said. 'She’s only just tasted the meatloaf.'

Simon shriveled his nose. 'Beg pardon.

But if you want to put heads together about audition choices, let us have a little chat about that,' he said and disappeared off in the direction of the sundae bar.

'Forgive Simon. We have not had high-quality cellists for a couple of years, so he is excited about the new Ritalin. In a purely aesthetic way. He’s queer, though it may be hard to tell because he’s English.'

'Oh. I see. But what did he say? I mean it sounds like he wants me to compete against him.'

'Of course- he does. That is fun.

That is why we are all at camp in the middle of a flipping rain forest,' he said, gesturing outside. 'That and the amazing cuisine.' Dick looked at me. 'Isn’t that why you’re here?'

I shrugged. 'I don’t know. I haven’t played with that many people, at least that many serious people.'

Dick scratched his ears. 'Really? You said you are from Oregon. Ever done anything with the Dauphin French horn Project?'

'The what?'

'Avant-garde French horn collective, eh. Remarkably interesting work.'

'I don’t live in Dauphin,' I mumbled, embarrassed that I had never even heard of any French horn Project.

'Well then, who do you play with?'

'Other people. Middle School students mostly.'

'No orchestra? No chamber-music ensemble? String quartet?'

I shook my head, remembering a time when one of my student teachers invited me to play in a quartet. I had turned her down because playing one-on-one with her was one thing; playing with strangers was another. I had always believed that the French horn was a solitary instrument, but now I was starting to wonder if I was the solitary one.

'Hmm. How are you any good?' Dick asked. 'I don’t mean to sound like an a*shole, but isn’t that how you get good? It is like tennis. If you play someone crappy, you end up missing shots or serving all sloppy, but if you play with an ace player, suddenly you are all at the net, lobbing good volleys.'

'I wouldn’t know,' I told Dick, feeling like the most boring, sheltered person ever. 'I don’t play tennis, either.'

The next few days went by in a blur. I had no idea why they put out the kayaks. There was no time for playing. Not that kind, anyway. The days were grueling. Up at six-thirty, breakfast by

seven, private study time for three hours in the morning and the afternoon, and orchestra rehearsal before dinner.

I had never played with more than a handful of musicians before, so the first few days in the orchestra were chaotic. The camp’s musical director, who was also the conductor, scrambled to get us situated, and then it was everything he could do to get us playing the most basic of movements in any semblance of time. On the third day, he trotted out some Brahms lullabies. The first time we played, it was painful. The instruments did not blend so much as collide, like rocks caught in a lawnmower. 'Terrible!'

he screamed. 'How can any of you ever expect to play in a professional orchestra if you cannot keep time on a lullaby? Now again!'

After about a week, it started to gel and I got my first taste of being a cog in the machine. It made me hear the French horn in an entirely new way, how its hushed tones worked in concert with the viola’s higher notes, how it provided a foundation for the woodwinds on the other side of the orchestra pit. And even though you might think that being part of a group would make you relax a little, not care so much how you sounded blended

among everyone else, if anything, the opposite was true.

I sat behind a seventeen-year-old viola player named May-Elizabeth. She was one of the most accomplished musicians that have been accepted into the Royal Conservatory of Music in the NY-and she was also model-gorgeous: tall, regal, with skin the color of coffee, and cheekbones that could carve ice. I would have been tempted to hate her were it not for her playing. If you are not careful, the viola can make the most awful screech, even in the hands of practiced musicians. But with all the sound rang out clean, pure, and light. Hearing her play, and

watching how deeply she lost herself in the music, I wanted to play like that. Better even. It was not just that I wanted to beat her, but also that I felt like I owed it to her, to the group, to myself, to play at her level.

26

'That’s sounding quite beautiful,' Simon said toward the end of camp as he listened to me practice a movement from Hayden’s French horn Concerto no. 2, a piece that had given me no end of trouble when I had first attempted it last spring. 'Are you using that for the concerto competition?'

I nodded. Then I could not help myself, I grinned. After dinner and before lights-out every night, Simon and I had been bringing our French horns outside to hold impromptu concerts in the long twilight. We took turns challenging each other to French horn duels, each trying to out-crazy-play the other. We were always competing, always trying to see who could play something better, faster, from memory. It had been so much fun and was one reason I was feeling so good about Hayden.

'Ah-h, someone’s confident.

Think you can beat me?' Simon asked.

'At soccer. Definitely,' I joked. Simon often told us that he was the black sheep in his family not because he was gay, or a musician, but because he was such a 'shity footballer.'

Simon pretended that I had shot him in the heart. Then he laughed. 'Amazing things happen when you stop hiding behind that hulking beast,' he said, gesturing to my French horn. I nodded. Simon smiled at me. 'Well, don’t go getting quite so overconfident. You should hear my Mozart. It sounds like the Ritalin angels singing.'

Neither one of us won the solo spot that year.

-And-

Though it would take me four more years, eventually I would seize the solo.

9:06 P.M.

'I’ve got exactly twenty minutes before our manager has a total shit fit.' Brooke Bogel’s raspy voice booms in the hospital’s now-quiet lobby. So, this is Beth’s idea: Brooke Bogel, the indie-music goddess and lead singer of Bikini. In a trademark punky glam outfit-tonight it is a short bubble skirt, fishnets, high black leather boots, an artfully ripped-up Shooting Star T-shirt, topped off with a

vintage fur shrug and a pair of black Jackie O glasses-she stands out in the hospital lobby like an ostrich in a chicken coop. She is surrounded by people: Maylie and Sarah; Dianna and Jodi, Shooting Star's rhythm guitarist and bass player, respectively, plus a handful of Dauphin hipsters who I vaguely recognize. With her magenta hair, she is like the sun, around which her admiring planets revolve. Beth is like a moon, standing off to the side, stroking his chin. Meanwhile, Ana looks shell-shocked, like a bunch of Martians just entered the building. Or it is because Ana worships Brooke Bogel. So does Beth. Aside from

me, this was one of the few things they had in common.

'I'll have you out of here in fifteen,' Beth promises, stepping into her galaxy.

She strides toward him. 'Beth, baby,' she croons. 'How are you holding up?' Brooke encircles him in a hug as if they are old friends, though I know that they only met for the first time today; just yesterday Beth was saying how nervous he was about it. But now she is here acting like her best friend. That is the power of the scene, I guess. As she embraces Beth, I see every guy and girl in that lobby watch hungrily, wishing, I

imagine, that their significant other was upstairs in grave condition so that they might be the ones getting the consolatory cuddle from Brooke.

I cannot help but wonder if I were here if I were watching this as regular old Earn, would I feel jealous, too? Then again, if I were regular old Earn, Brooke Bogel would not be in this hospital lobby as part of some great ruse to get Beth in to see me.

'Okay, kids. Time to rock-and-roll.

Beth, what’s the plan?' Brooke asks.

'Why would a janitor be in the ICU?' Ana asks. She is a stickler for these kinds of details.

'Broken lightbulb. I do not know. It’s all in how you pull it off.'

27

'I still don’t understand why you don’t just go to her family?' Asks Ana, pragmatic as ever. 'I’m sure her Gram’s parents could explain, could get you in to see Earn.'

Beth shakes his head. 'You know, when the nurse threatened to call security, my first thought was ‘I will just call Earn’s parents to fix this.’' Beth stops,

takes a few breaths. 'It just keeps walloping me over and over, and it’s like it’s the first time every time,' he says in a husky voice.

'I know,' Ana replies in a whisper.

'Anyhow,' Beth says, resuming his search for the light switch, 'I can’t go to her Gram’s parents. I cannot add anything more to their burden. This is something I have to do for myself.'

I am sure my Gram’s parents would be happy to help Beth. They have met him a bunch of times, and they like him a lot. On Christmas, Gram is always sure to make maple fudge for him

because he once mentioned how much he liked it.

But I also know that sometimes Beth needs to do things dramatically. He is fond of Gram's Gesture. Like saving up two weeks of pizza-delivery tips to take me to Yo-Yo Ma instead of just asking me out on a regular date. Like decorating my windowsill with flowers every day for a week when I was contagious with chickenpox.

Now I can see that Beth is concentrating on the new task at hand. I am not sure what exactly he has in mind, but whatever the plan, I am grateful for it, if only because it has pulled him out of his

emotional stupor I saw in the hallway outside the ICU. I have seen him get like this before, when he is writing a new song or is trying to convince me to do something I will not want to do-like go camping with him-and nothing, not a meteorite crashing into the planet, not even a girlfriend in the ICU, can dissuade him.

Besides, it is the girlfriend in the ICU that is necessitating Beth's ruse, to begin with. And from what I can guess, it is the oldest hospital trick in the book, taken straight from that movie The Fugitive, which Mom and I recently

watched on TNT. I have my doubts about it. So does Ana.

'Don’t you think that nurse might recognize you?' Ana asks. 'You did yell at her.'

'She won’t have to recognize me if she doesn’t see me. Now I get why you and Earn are such peas in a pod. A pair of Cassandras.'

Beth has never met Mrs. Schein, so he does not get that implying that Ana is a worrywart who is fighting words. Ana scowls, but then I can see her give in. 'Maybe this retarded plan of yours would work better if we could see what we’re

doing.' She fumbles around in her bag and pulls out the cell phone her mother made her start carrying when she was ten-child LoJack, Ana called it and turned on the monitor. A square of light softens the darkness.

'Now, that’s more like the brilliant girl Earn brags about,' Beth says. He turns on his cell phone and now the room is illuminated by a dull Gallow.

Unfortunately, the Gallow shows that the tiny broom closet is full of brooms, a bucket, and a pair of mops, but is lacking any of the disguises that Beth was hoping for. If I could, I would inform them that the hospital has locker rooms,

where the doctors and nurses can stow their street clothes and where they change into their scrubs or their lab coats. The only generic hospital garb sitting around are those embarrassing gowns that they put the patients in. Beth could throw on a gown and cruise the hallways in a wheelchair with no one the wiser, but such a getup would still not get him into the ICU.

'Shit,' Beth says.

'We can keep trying,' Ana says, suddenly the cheer-leader. 'There are like ten floors in this place. I’m sure there are other unlocked closets.'

Beth sinks to the floor. 'Nah. You are right. This is stupid. We need to produce a better plan.'

'You could fake a drug overdose or something so you wind up in the ICU,' Ana says.

'This is Dauphin. You’re lucky if a drug overdose gets you into the ER,' Beth replies. 'No, I was thinking more like a distraction. You know, like making the fire alarm go off so the nurses all come running out.'

'Do you think sprinklers and panicked nurses are good for Earn?' Ana asks.

'Well, not that exactly, but something so that they all look away for half a second and I stealthily sneak in.'

'They'll find you out right away.

They'll throw you out on your backside.'

'I don't care,' Beth responds. 'I only need a second.'

'Why? I mean what can you do in a second?'

Beth pauses for a second. His eyes, which are normally a kind of mutt's mixture of gray, brown, and green, have gone dark. 'So, I can show her that I'm here. That someone's still here.'

Ana does not ask any more questions after that. They sit there in silence, each lost in their thoughts, and it reminds me of how Beth and I can be together but quiet and separate and I see that they are friends now, friends for real. No matter what happens, at least I have achieved that.

After about five minutes, Beth knocks on his forehead.

'Of course,' he says.

'What?'

'Time to activate the Bat-Signal.'

'Huh?'

'Come on. I'll show you.'

28

When I first started playing the French horn, Dad was still playing drums in his band, though that all started to taper off a couple of years later when Naddalin arrived. But right from the get-go, I could see that there was something different about playing my kind of music, something more than my parents' obvious bewilderment with my classical tastes. My music was solitary. I mean Dad might hammer on his drums for a few hours by himself or write songs alone at the kitchen table, plinking out the notes on his beat-up acoustic guitar, but he always

said that songs are not written as you played them. That was what made it so interesting.

When I played, it was most often by myself, in my room. Even when I practiced with the rotating Middle School students, other than during lessons, I still usually played solo. And when I gave a concert or recital, it was alone, on a stage, my French horn, myself, and an audience. And unlike Dad's shows, where enthusiastic fans jumped the stage and then dive-bombed into the crowd, there was always a wall between the audience and me. After a while playing like this got lonely. It also got boring.

So- in the spring of eighth grade I decided to quit. I planned to trail off quietly, by cutting back my obsessive practices, not giving recitals. I figured that if I laid off gradually, by the time I entered high school in the fall, I could start fresh, no longer be known as 'the cellist.' Maybe then I would pick up a new instrument, guitar, or bass, or even drums. Plus, with Mom too busy with Naddalin to notice the length of my French horn practice, and Dad swamped with lesson plans and grading papers at his new teaching job, I figured nobody would even really- um- a that I had stopped playing until it was already a

done deal. At least that is what I told myself. The truth was, I could no sooner quit French horn cold turkey than I could stop breathing.

I might have quit for real, were it not for Ana. One afternoon, I invited her to go downtown with me after school.

'It’s a weekday. Don’t you have practice?' she asked as she twisted the combination on her locker.

'I can skip it today,' I said, pretending to search for my earth-science book.

'Have the pod people stolen Earn? First no recitals. And now you are

skipping out on practice. What’s going on?'

'I don’t know,' I said, tapping my fingers against the locker. 'I’m thinking of trying a new instrument. Like drums. Dad’s kit is down in the basement gathering dust.'

'Yes, right. You are on drums. That is rich,' Ana said with a chuckle.

'I’m serious.'

Ana had looked at me, her mouth agape, like I had just told her I planned to sauté up a platter of slugs for dinner. 'You can’t quit French horn,' she said after a moment of stunned silence.

'Why not?'

She looked pained as they tried to explain. 'I don’t know but it just seems like your French horn is part of who you are. I can’t imagine you without that thing between your legs.'

'It’s stupid. I cannot even play in the school marching band. I mean, who plays the French horn anyhow? A bunch of old people. It is a dumb instrument for a girl to play. It is so dorky. And I want to have more free time, to do fun stuff.'

'What kind of ‘fun stuff’?' Ana challenged.

'Um, you know? Shopping. Hanging out with you...'

'Please,' Ana said. 'You hate to shop. And you spend time together with me plenty. But fine, skip practice today. I want to show you something.' She took me home with her and dragged out a CD of Nirvana MTV Unplugged and played me 'Something in the Way.'

'Listen to that,' she said. 'Two guitar players, a drummer, and a French horn player. Her name is Lori Goldston and I bet when she was younger, she practiced two hours a day like some other girl I know because if you want to play with the Philharmonic, or with Nirvana,

that is what you must do. And I don’t think anyone would dare call her a dork.'

I took the CD home and listened to it over and over for the next week, pondering what Ana said. I pulled my French horn out a few times, played along. It was a different kind of music than I had played before, challenging, and strangely invigorating. I planned to play 'Something in the Way' for Ana the following week when she came over for dinner.

But before I had a chance, at the dinner table Ana casually announced to my parents that she thought I ought to go to summer camp.

'What, you trying to convert me so I'll go to your Torah camp?' I asked.

'Nope. It's a music camp.' She pulled out a Gallery brochure for the Valley Conservatory, a summer program in British Columbia. 'It's for serious musicians,' Ana said. 'You have to send a recording of your playing to get in. I called. The deadline for applications is May first, so there's still time.' She turned to face me head-on as if she were daring me to get mad at her for interfering.

I was not mad. My heart was pounding as if Ana had announced that my family won a lottery and she was about to reveal how much. I looked at her,

the nervous look in her eyes betraying the 'you want to piece of me?' smirk on her face, and I was overwhelmed with gratitude to be friends with someone who often understood me better than I understood myself. Dad asked me if I wanted to go, and when I protested about the money, he said never to mind about that. Did I want to go? And I did. More than anything.

Three months later, when Dad dropped me off in a lonely corner of Vancouver Island, I was not so sure. The place looked like a typical summer camp, log cabins in the woods, kayaks strewn on the beach.

There were about fifty kids who, judging they were hugging and squealing, had all known one another for years. Meanwhile, I did not know anybody. For the first six hours, no one talked to me except for the camp’s assistant director, who assigned me to a cabin, showed me my bunk bed, and pointed the way to the cafeteria, where that night, I was given a plate of something that was meatloaf.

'It’s not like that,' I said, though of course, it was totally like that.

29

'I just don’t see why you couldn’t tell me sooner,' she said in a quiet voice.

I was about to give her my whole one kiss-not-equaling-a-relationship story and to explain that I did not want to blow it out of proportion, but I stopped myself. 'I was afraid you'd be mad at me,' I admitted.

'I'm not,' Ana said. 'But I will be if you ever lie to me again.'

'Okay,' I said.

'Or if you turn into one of those girlfriends, always ponying around after her boyfriend, and speaking in the first-person plural. 'We love winter. We think the Velvet Underground is seminal.''

'You know I wouldn’t rock-talk to you. First-person singular or plural. I promise.'

'Good,' Ana replied. 'Because if you turn into one of those girls, I’ll shoot you.'

'If I turn into one of those girls, I’ll hand you the gun.'

Ana laughed for real at that, and the tension was broken. She popped a hunk of pie into her mouth. 'How did your parents take it?'

'Dad went through the five phases of grieving-denial, anger, acceptance, whatever-in like one day. I

think he’s more freaked out that he is old enough to have a daughter who has a boyfriend.' I paused, took a sip of my coffee, letting the word boyfriend rest out in the air. 'And he claims he can’t believe that

I’m dating a musician.'

'You’re a musician,' Ana reminded me.

'You know, a punk, pop musician.'

'Shooting Star is emo-core,' Ana corrected. Unlike me, she cared about the myriad pop musical distinctions: punk, indie, alternative, hard-core, emo-core.

'It’s mostly stifling air, you know, part of his whole bow-tie-Dad thing. Dad likes Beth. He met him when he picked me up for the concert. Now he wants me to bring him over for dinner, but it has only been a week. I’m not quite ready for a meet-the-folks moment yet.'

'I don’t think I’ll ever be ready for that.' Ana shuddered at the thought of it.

'What about your mom?'

'She offered to take me to Planned Parenthood to get the Pill and told me to make Beth get tested for various diseases. In the meantime, she ordered me to buy condoms now. She

even gave me ten bucks to start my supply.'

'Have you?' Ana gasped.

'No, it’s only been a week,' I said.

'We’re still in the same group on that one.'

'For now,' Ana said.

One other category that Ana and I devised was people who tried to be cool and people who did not. On this one, I thought that Beth, Ana, and I were in the same column because even though Beth was cool, he did not try. It was effortless for him. So, I expected the three of us to become the best of friends. I expected

Beth to love everyone I loved as much as I did.

And it did work out like that with my family. He practically became the third kid. But it never clicked with Ana. Beth treated her the way that I had always imagined he would treat a girl like me. He was nice enough-polite, friendly, but distant. He did not attempt to enter her world or gain her confidence. I suspected he thought she was not cool enough, and it made me mad. After we had been together for about three months, we had a huge fight about it.

'I’m not dating Ana. I’m dating you,' he said after I accused him of not being nice enough to her.

'So what? You have lots of female friends. Why not add her to the stable?'

Beth shrugged. 'I don’t know. It’s just not there.'

'You’re such a snob!' I said, suddenly furious.

Beth eyed me with furrowed brows like I was a math problem on the blackboard that he was trying to figure out. 'How does that make me a snob? You cannot force a friendship. We just don’t have a lot in common.'

'That’s what makes you a snob! You only like people like you,' I cried. I stormed out, expecting him to follow me, begging forgiveness, and when he did not, my fury doubled. I rode my bike over to Ana’s house to vent. She listened to my diatribe; her expression purposefully blasé.

'That’s just ridiculous that he only likes people like him,' she scolded when I had finished spewing. 'He likes you, and you’re not like him.'

'That’s the problem,' I mumbled.

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'Well, then deal with that. Don’t drag me into your drama,' she said. 'Besides, I don’t click with him, either.'

'You don’t?'

'No, Earn. Not everyone swoons for Beth.'

'I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that I want you guys to be friends.'

'Yes, well, I want to live in New York

City and have normal parents. As the man said, ‘You can’t always get what you want.’'

'But you’re two of the most important people in my life.'

Ana looked at my red and teary face and her expression softened into a gentle smile. 'We know that, Earn. But we are from various parts of your life, just like music and I am from various parts of your life. And that is fine. You don’t have to choose one or the other, at least not as far as I’m concerned.'

'But I want those parts of my life to come together.'

Ana shook her head. 'It doesn’t work that way. Look, I accept Beth because you love him. And I assume he

accepts me because you love me. If it makes you feel any better, your love binds us. And that is enough. I and he don’t have to love each other.'

'But I want you to,' I wailed.

'Earn,' Ana said, an edge of warning in her voice signaling the end of her patience.

'You’re starting to act like one of those girls.

Do you need to get me a gun?'

Later that night, I stopped by Beth’s house to say I was sorry. He accepted my apology with a bemused kiss on the nose. And then nothing changed.

He and Ana remained cordial but distant, no matter how much I tried to sell them on each other. The funny thing was, I never really bought into Ana's notion that they were somehow bound together through me-until just now when I saw her half carrying him down the hospital corridor.

31

8:12 P.M.

I watch Ana and Beth disappear down the hall. I mean to follow them, but I am glued to the linoleum, unable to move my phantom legs. It is only after they disappear around a corner that I

rouse myself and trail after them, but they have already gone inside the elevator.

By now I have figured out that I do not have any supernatural abilities. I cannot float through walls or dive down stairwells. I can only do the things I would be able to do in real life, except that what I do in my world is invisible to everyone else. At least that is the case because no one looks twice when I open doors or hit the elevator button. I can touch things, even manipulate door handles and the like, but I cannot feel anything or anybody. It is like I am experiencing everything through a fishbowl. It does not make sense to me,

but then again, nothing that is happening today makes much sense.

I assume that Ana and Beth are headed to the waiting room to join the vigil, but when I get there, my family is not there. There is a stack of coats and sweaters on the chairs, and I recognize my cousin Heather's bright orange down jacket. She lives in the country and likes to hike in the woods, so she says that the neon colors are necessary to keep drunk hunters from mistaking her for a bear.

I look at the clock on the wall. It could be dinnertime. I wander back down the halls to the cafeteria, which has the same fried-food, boiled-vegetable stench

as cafeterias everywhere. Unappetizing smell aside, it is full of people. The tables are crammed with doctors and nurses and nervous-looking medical students in short white jackets and stethoscopes so shiny that they look like toys. They are all chowing down on cardboard pizza and freeze-dried mashed potatoes. It takes me a while to locate my family, huddled around a table. Gram’s is chatting to Heather. Gramps is paying careful attention to his turkey sandwich.

Aunt Kate and Aunt Diane are in the corner, whispering about something. 'Some cuts and bruises. He was already released from the hospital,' Aunt Kate is

saying, and for a second I think she’s talking about Naddalin and I am so excited I could cry. But then I hear her say something about there being no alcohol in his system, how our car just swerved into his lane and some guy named Mr. Dunlap says he did not have time to stop, and then I really- it is not Naddalin they are talking about; it is the other driver.

'The police said it was probably the snow or a deer that caused them to swerve,' Aunt Kate continues. 'And this lopsided outcome is fairly common. One party is simply fine and the other suffers catastrophic injuries...' She trails off.

I do not know that I would call Mr. Dunlap 'simply fine,' no matter how superficial his injuries. I think about what it must be like to be him, to wake up on Tuesday morning and get into your truck to head off to work at the mill or to the feed-supply store or to Loretta’s Diner to have eggs over easy. Mr.

Dunlap, who was perfectly happy or perfectly miserable, married with kids or an unmarried person. But whatever and whoever he was early this morning, he is not that person any longer. His life has changed irrevocably, too. If what my aunt says is true, and the crash was not his fault, then he was what Ana would call

'a poor schmuck,' in the wrong place at the wrong time. And because of his bad luck and because he was in his truck, driving eastbound on Route 27 this morning, two kids are now parentless and at least one of them is in grave condition.

How do you live with that? For a second, I have a fantasy of getting better and getting out of here and going to Mr. Dunlap’s house, to relieve him of his burden, to reassure him that it is not his fault. We had become friends.

Of course, it would not work like that. It would be awkward and sad. Besides, I still have no idea what I will decide, still have no clue how I would

determine to stay or not stay in the first place. Until I figure that out, I must leave things up to the fates, or to the doctors, or whoever decides these matters when the decider is too confused to choose between the elevator and the stairs.

I need Beth. I take a final look at him and Ana, but they are not here, so I head back upstairs to the ICU.

I find them hiding out on the trauma floor, several halls away from the ICU. They are trying to look casual as they test out the doors to various supply closets. When they finally find an unlocked one, they sneak inside. They fumble around in the dark for a light

switch. I hate to break it to them, but it is backing out in the hall.

'I’m not sure this kind of thing works outside of the movies,' Ana tells Beth as she feels along the wall.

'Every faction has its base in fact,' he tells her.

'You don’t look like the doctor type,' she says.

32

'I was hoping for an orderly. Or maybe a janitor.'

But it is quiet in this room now. So, I am sitting on the windowsill, staring

out at night. A car screeches into the parking garage, shaking me out of my reverie. I peered down in time to catch a glimpse of the taillights of a pink car disappearing into the darkness. Sarah, who is the girlfriend of Maylie, Shooting Star's drummer, has a pink Dodge Dart. I held my breath, waiting for Beth to appear out of the tunnel. And then he is here, walking up the ramp, hugging his leather jacket against the winter night. I can see the chain of his wallet glinting in the floodlights. He stops, turns around to talk to someone behind him. I see the soft figure of a woman emerge from the

shadows. At first, I think it must be Maylie.

But then I see the braid.

I wish I could hug her. To thank her for always being one step ahead of what I need.

Of course, Ana would go to Beth, to tell him in person as opposed to breaking the news over the phone, and then to bring him here, to me. It was Ana who knew that Beth was playing a show in Dauphin. Ana must have somehow managed to cajole her mother into driving downtown. Ana, judging by Mrs. Schein's absence, must have convinced her mother

to go home, to let her stay with Beth and me. I remember how it took Ana two months to get permission to take that helicopter flight with her uncle, so I am impressed that she managed this amount of emancipation within the space of a few hours. It was Ana who must have braved any number of intimidating bouncers and hipsters to find

Beth. And Ana who must have braved telling Beth.

I know this sounds ridiculous, but I am glad it was not me. I do not think I could have borne it. Ana had to bear it.

And now, because of her, he is finally here.

All-day long, I have been imagining Beth's arrival, and in my fantasy, I rush to greet him, even though he cannot see me and even though, from what I can tell so far, it is nothing like that movie Ghost, where you can walk through your loved ones so that they feel your presence.

But now that Beth is here, I am paralyzed. I am scared to see him. To see his face. I have seen Beth cry twice. Once when we watched It Is a Wonderful Life. And another time when we were at the train station in Seattle and we saw a

mother yelling and swatting her son who had Down syndrome. He just got quiet and it was only when we were walking away from what I saw the tears rolling down his cheeks. And it damn near tore my heart out. If he is crying, it will kill me. Forget this my choice business. That alone will do me in.

I am such a chicken-shit.

I look at the clock on the wall. It is past seven now. Shooting Star will not be opening for Bikini. Which is a shame? It was a huge break for them. For a second, I wonder if the rest of the band will go on without Beth. I highly doubt it, though. It is not just that he is the lead

singer and the lead guitar player. The band has this kind of code. Loyalty to feel is important. Last summer, when Maylie and Sarah broke up (for what turned out to be all a month) and Maylie was too distraught to play, they canceled their five-night tour, even though this guy Gordon who plays drums in another band offered to sub for her.

I watch Beth make his way to the hospital's main entrance, Ana trailing behind him. Just before he comes to the covered awning and the automatic doors, he looks up into the sky. He is waiting for Ana, but I also like to think he is looking for me. His face, illuminated by the lights,

is blank, like someone vacuumed away all his personality, leaving only a mask. He does not look like him. But at least he is not crying.

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That gives me the guts to go to him now. Or to me, to the ICU, which is where I know he will want to go. Beth knows Gram's and Gramps and the cousins, and I imagine he will join the waiting-room vigil later.

But right now, he is here for me.

Back in the ICU time stands still as always. One of the surgeons who worked on me earlier-the one who

sweated a lot and, when it was his turn to pick the music, blasted Weezer-is checking in on me.

The light is dim and artificial and kept to the same level all the time, but even so, the circadian rhythms win out and a nighttime hush has fallen over the place. It is less frenetic than it was during the day like the nurses and machines are all a little tired and have reverted to power-save mode.

So, when Beth’s voice reverberates from the hallway outside the ICU, it wakes everyone up.

'What do you mean I can’t go in?' he booms.

I make my way across the ICU, standing just on the other side of the automatic doors. I hear the orderly outside explain to Beth that he is not allowed in this part of the hospital.

'This is bullshit!' Beth yells.

Inside the ward, all the nurses look toward the door, their heavy eyes wary. I am sure they are thinking: Don’t we have enough to deal with inside without having to calm down crazy people outside? I will not explain to them that

Beth is not crazy. That he never yells, except for incredibly special occasions.

The graying middle-aged nurse who does not attend to the patients but sits by and monitors the computers and phones gives a little nod and stands up as if accepting a nomination. She straightens her creased white pants and makes her way toward the door. She is not the best one to talk to him. I wish I could warn them that they ought to send Nurse Ramirez, the one who reassured my Gram's parents (and freaked me out). She would be able to calm him down. But this one is only going to make it worse. I follow her through the double doors

where Beth and Ana are arguing with an orderly. The orderly looks at the nurse. 'I told them they’re not authorized to be up here,' he explains. The nurse dismisses him with the wave of a hand.

'Can I help you, young man?' She asks Beth. Her voice sounds irritated and impatient, like some of Dad’s tenured colleagues at school who Dad says are just counting the days until retirement.

Beth clears his throat, attempting to pull himself together. 'I’d like to visit a patient,' he says, gesturing toward the doors blocking him from the ICU.

'I’m afraid that’s not possible,' she replies.

'But my girlfriend, Earn, she’s-'

'She’s being well cared for,' the nurse interrupts. She sounds tired, too tired for sympathy, too tired to be moved by young love.

'I understand that. And I am grateful for it,' Beth says. He is trying his best to play by her rules, to sound mature, but I hear the catch in his voice when he says: 'I need to see her.'

'I’m sorry, young man, but visitations are restricted to immediate family.'

I hear Beth gasp. Immediate family. The nurse does not mean to be cruel. She is just clueless, but Beth will not know that. I feel the need to protect him and to protect the nurse from what he might do to her. I reach for him, on instinct, even though I cannot touch him. But his back is to me now. His shoulders are hunched over, his legs starting to buckle.

Ana, who was hovering near the wall, is suddenly at his side, her arms encircling his falling form. With both arms locked around his waist, she turns to the nurse, her eyes blazing with fury.

'You don’t understand!' she cries. 'Do I need to call security?' the nurse asks.

Beth waves his hand, surrendering to the nurse, to Ana. 'Don’t,' he whispers to Ana.

So, Ana does not. Without saying another word, she hoists his arm around her shoulder and shifts his weight onto her. Beth has about a foot and fifty pounds on Ana, but after stumbling for a second, she adjusts to the added burden. She bears it.

Ana and I have this theory that everything in the world can be divided into two groups.

Some people like classical music. People who like pop. There are city people. And country people. Coke drinkers. Pepsi drinkers. There are conformists and free-thinkers. Virgins and nonvirgins. And there are the kind of girls who have boyfriends in high school and the kind of girls who do not.

Ana and I had always assumed that we both belonged to the latter category. 'Not that we'll be forty-year-old virgins or anything,' she reassured. 'We'll just be the kinds of girls who have boyfriends in Middle School.'

That always made sense to me seemed preferable even. Mom was the

sort of girl who had had boyfriends in high school and often remarked that she wished she had not wasted her time. 'There’s only so many times a girl wants to get drunk on Mickey’s Big Mouth, go cow-tipping, and make out in the back of a pickup truck. As far as the boys I dated were concerned, that amounted to a romantic evening.'

Dad, on the other hand, did not date till Middle School. He was shy in high school, but then he started playing drums and in the first year of Middle School joined a punk band, and boom, girlfriends. Or at least a few of them until

he met Mom, and boom, a wife. I figured it would go that way for me.

So, it was a surprise to both Ana and me when I wound up in Group A, with the boyfriend girls. At first, I tried to hide it. After I came home from the Yo-Yo Ma concert, I told Ana the vaguest of details. I did not mention kissing. I am a rational omission: There was no point getting all worked up for a kiss. One kiss does not make a relationship. I had kissed boys before, and usually by the next day the kiss had evaporated like a dewdrop in the sun.

Except I knew that with Beth it was important. I knew from the way the

warmth flooded my whole body that night after he dropped me off at home, kissing me once more on my doorstep. I stayed up until dawn hugging my pillow. By the way that I could not eat the next day, I could not wipe the smile off my face. I recognized that the kiss was a door I had walked through. And I knew that I had left Ana on the other side.

After a week and a few more stolen kisses, I knew I had to tell Ana. We went for coffee after school. It was May but it was pouring rain as though it were November. I felt slightly suffocated by what I had to do.

'I’ll buy it. You want one of your froufrou drinks?' I asked. That was another one of the categories we had determined: people who drank plain coffee and people who drank gussied-up caffeine drinks like the mint-chip lattes Ana was so fond of.

'I think I’ll try the cinnamon-spice chai latte,' she said, giving me a stern look that said, I will not be ashamed of my beverage selection.

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I bought us our drinks and a piece of marionberry pie with two forks. I sat down across from Ana, running the

fork along the scalloped edge of the flaky crust.

'I have something to tell you,' I said.

'Something about having a boyfriend?' Ana’s voice was amused, but even though I was looking down, I could tell that she had rolled her eyes.

'How’d you know?' I asked, meeting her gaze.

She rolled her eyes again. 'Please. Everyone knows. It is the hottest gossip on this side of Melanie Farrow dropping out to have a baby. It’s like a Democratic presidential candidate

marrying a Republican presidential candidate.'

'Who said anything about marrying?'

'I’m just being metaphoric,' Ana said. 'Anyhow, I know. I knew even before you knew.'

'Bullshit.'

'Come on. A guy like Beth going to a Yo-Yo Ma concert? He was buttering you up.'

But I still hated the shows and hated myself for hating them. The clubs were smoky, which hurt my eyes and made my clothes stink. The speakers were

always turned up so high that the music blared, causing my ears to ring so loudly afterward that the high-pitched drone would keep me up. I would lie in bed, replaying the awkward night and feeling shittier about it with each playback.

'Don’t tell me you’re going to back out,' Beth said, looking equal parts hurt and irritated.

'What about Naddalin? We promised we’d take him trick-or-treating-'

'Yes, at five o’clock. We do not have to be at the show until then. I doubt even Master Ted could trick-or-treat for five solid hours. So, you have no excuse.

And you'd better get a good outfit together because I am going to look hot, in an eighteenth-century kind of way.'

After Beth left to go to work delivering pizzas, I had a pit in my stomach. I went upstairs to practice the Do- Ok-á piece Professor Kristiee had assigned me, and to work out what was bothering me. Why didn't I like his shows? Was it because Shooting Star was getting popular and I was jealous? Did the ever-growing masses of girl groupies put me off? This seemed like a logical enough explanation, but it was not it.

After I had played for about ten minutes, it came to me: My aversion to

Beth’s shows had nothing to do with music or groupies or envy. It had to with the doubts. The same niggling doubts I always had about not belonging. I did not feel like I belonged with my family, and now I did not feel like I belonged with Beth, except unlike my family, who was stuck with me, Beth had chosen me, and this I did not understand. Why had he fallen for me? It did not make sense. I knew it was music that brought us together in the first place, put us in the same space so we could even get to know each other. And I knew that Beth liked how into music I was. And that he dug my sense of humor, 'so dark you almost miss

it,' he said. And, speaking of dark, I knew he had a thing for dark-haired girls because all his girlfriends had been brown-haired people. And I knew that when it was the two of us alone together, we could talk for hours, or sit reading side by side for hours, each one plugged into our own iPod, and still feel completely together. I understood all that in my head, but I still did not believe it in my heart. When I was with Beth, I felt picked, chosen, special, and that just made me wonder why me? even more.

And this was why even though Beth willingly submitted to Schubert symphonies and attended any recital I

gave, bringing me stargazer lilies, my favorite flower, I would still rather have gone to the dentist than to one of his shows. Which was so churlish of me? I thought of what Mom sometimes said to me when I was feeling insecure: 'Fake it till you make it.' By the time I finished playing the piece three times over, I decided that not only would I go to his show, but for once I would make as much of an effort to understand his world as he did mine.

'I need your help,' I told Mom that night after dinner as we stood side by side doing dishes.

'I think we've established that I'm not particularly good at trigonometry. You can try the online-tutor thing,' Mom said.

'Not math help. Something else.'

'I'll do my best. What do you need?'

'Advice. Who is the coolest, toughest, hottest rocker girl you can think of?'

'Debbie Harry,' Mom said.

'That's'

'Not finished,' Mom interrupted.

'You can't ask me to pick only one. That is so

Sophie’s Choice. Kathleen Hannah. Patti Smith. Joan Jett. Courtney Love, in her demented destructionist way. Lucinda Williams, even though she is country she is tough. Ana Gordon from Sonic Youth, pushing fifty and still at it. That Cat Power woman. Joan Armatrading. Why is this social-studies project?'

'Kind of,' I answered, toweling off a chipped plate. 'It’s for Halloween.'

Mom clapped her soapy hands together in delight. 'You planning on impersonating one of us?'

'Yes,' I replied. 'Can you help me?'

Mom took off work early so we could trawl through vintage-clothing stores. She decided we should go for a pastiche of rocker looks, rather than trying to copy anyone artist. We bought a pair of tight, jeans pants. A blond bobbed wig with severe bangs, à la early-eighties Debbie Harry, which Mom streaked with purple Manic Panic. For accessories, we got a black leather band for one wrist and about two dozen silver bangles for the other. Mom fished out her vintage Sonic Youth T-shirt-warning me not to take it off lest someone grab it and sell it on eBay

for a couple hundred bucks-and the pair of black, pointy-toed leather spiked boots that she had worn to her wedding.

On Halloween, she did my makeup, thick streaks of black liquid eyeliner that made my eyes look dangerous. The white powder made my skin pale. Redlined gashes on my lips. A stick-on nose rings. When I looked in the mirror, I saw Mom's face peering back at me. It was the blond wig, but this was the first time I ever thought I looked like any of my immediate family.

My parents and Naddalin waited downstairs for Beth while I stayed in my room. It felt like this was prom or

something. Dad held the camera. Mom was practically dancing with excitement. When Beth came through the door, showering Naddalin with Skittles, Mom and Dad called me down.

I did a slinky walk as best as I could in the heels. I had expected Beth to go crazy when he saw me, his jeans-and-sweaters girlfriend all glammed out. But he smiled his usual greeting, chuckling a bit. 'Nice costume,' was all he said.

'Quid pro quo. Only fair,' I said, pointing to his Mozart ensemble.

'You look scary but pretty,' Naddalin said. 'I'd say sexy, too, but I'm your brother, so that's gross.'

'How do you even know what sexy means?' I asked. 'You're six.'

'Everyone knows what sexy means,' he said.

Everyone but me, I guess. But that night, I learned. When we trick-or-treated with Naddalin, my neighbors who had known me for years did not recognize me. Guys who had never given me a second glance did a double take. And every time that happened, I felt a little bit more like the risky sexy chick I was

pretending to be. Fake it till you make it worked.

The club where Shooting Star was playing was packed. Everyone was in costume, most of the girls in the kinds of racy get-ups French house cleaners, whip-wielding dominatrixes, slutty Wizard of Oz Dorothys with skirts hiked up to show their ruby garters-that normally made me feel like a big oaf. I did not feel oafish at all that night, even if nobody seemed to recognize that I was wearing a costume.

'You were supposed to dress up,' a skeleton guy chastised me before offering me a beer.

'I freaking LOVE those pants,' a flapper girl screamed into my ear. 'Did you get them in Seattle?'

'Aren’t you in the Crack House

Quartet?' a guy in a Hillary Clinton mask asked me, referring to some hard-core band that Beth loved and I hated.

When Shooting Star went on, I did not stay backstage, which is what I normally did. Backstage I could sit on a chair and have an uninterrupted view and not have to talk to anybody. This time, I lingered out by the bar, and then, when

the flapper girl grabbed me, I joined her dancing in the mosh pit.

I had never gone into the mosh pit before. I had little interest in running around in circles while drunk, brawny boys in leather trod on my toes. But tonight, I got into it. I understood what it was like to merge your energy with the mobs and to absorb theirs as well. How in the pit, when things got going, you were not so much walking or dancing as being sucked into a whirlpool?

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When Beth finished his set, I was as panting and sweaty as he was. I did not

go backstage to greet him before everyone else got to him. I waited for him to go to the floor of the club, to meet his public like he did at the end of every show. And when he came out, a towel around his neck, sucking on a bottle of water, I flung myself into his arms and kissed him openmouthed and sloppy in front of everyone. I could feel him smiling as he kissed me back.

'Well, well, looks like someone has been infused with the spirit of Debbie Harry,' he said, wiping some of the lipstick off his chin.

'I guess so. What about you? Are you feeling very Mozart?'

'All I know about him is from what I saw in that movie. But I remember he was kind of a horndog, so after that kiss, I guess I am. Are you ready to go? I can load up and we can get out of here.'

'No, let us stay for the last set.'

'Really?' Beth asked, his eyebrows rising in surprise.

'Yes. I might even go into the pit with you.'

'Have you been drinking?' He teased. 'Just the Kool-Aid,' I replied.

We danced, stopping now and again to make out until the club closed.

On the way home, Beth held my hand while he drove. Every so often he would turn to look at me and smile while shaking his head.

'So, you like me like this?' I asked.

'Hmm,' he responded.

'Is that a yes or a no?'

'Of course, I like you.'

'No, like this. Did you like me tonight?'

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Beth straightened up. 'I liked that you got into the show and weren’t

chomping to leave ASAP. And I loved dancing with you. And I loved how comfortable you seemed to be with all us riffraff.'

'But did you like me like this? Like me better?'

'Then what?' he asked. He looked genuinely perplexed.

'Then normal.' I was getting irritated now. I had felt so brazen tonight, like the Halloween costume had imbued me with a new personality, one more worthy of Beth, of my family. I tried to explain that to him, and my dismay found myself near tears.

Beth seemed to sense that I was upset. He pulled the car off onto a logging road and turned to me. 'Earn, Earn, Earn,' he said, stroking the tendrils of my hair that had escaped from the wig. 'This is you I like. You dress sexier and are, you know, blond, and that is different. But you who you are tonight is the same you, I was in love with yesterday, the same you, I will be in love with tomorrow. I love that you are fragile and tough, quiet, and kick-ass. Hell, you're one of the most punk girls I know, no matter who you listen to or what you wear.'

After that, whenever I started to doubt Beth's feelings, I would think about

my wig, gathering dust in my closet, and it would bring back the memory of that night. And then I would not feel insecure. I would just feel lucky.

7:13 P.M.

He is here.

I have been spending time together in an empty hospital room in the maternity ward, wanting to be far away from my relatives and even farther away from the ICU and that nurse, or more specifically what that nurse said and what I now understand. I needed to be somewhere where people would not be

sad, where the thoughts concerned life, not death.

So, I came here, the land of screaming babies. The wail of the newborns is comforting. They have so much fight in them already.

Another nurse comes by. She has dark hair and dark eyes brightened with lots of shimmery eye makeup. Her nails are acrylic and have heart decals on them. She must have to work hard to keep her nails so pretty. I admire that.

She is not my nurse, but she comes up to Gram’s and Gramps just the same. 'Don’t you doubt for a second that

she can hear you,' she tells them. 'She’s aware of everything that’s going on.' She stands there with her hands on her hips. I can almost picture her snapping gum. Gram and Gramps stare at her, lapping up what she is telling them. 'You might think that the doctors or nurses or all this is running the show,' she says, gesturing to the wall of medical equipment. 'Nuh-uh. She is running the show. She is just biding her time. So, you talk to her. You tell her to take all the time she needs, but to come on back.

You’re waiting for her.'

Mom and Dad would never call Naddalin or my mistakes. Or accidents.

Or surprises. Or any of those other stupid euphemisms. But neither one of us was planned, and they never tried to hide that.

Mom got pregnant with me when she was young. Not teenager-young, but young for their set of friends. She was twenty-three and she and Dad had already been married for a year.

Funnily, Dad was always a bowtie wearer, always a little more traditional than you might imagine. Because even though he had blue hair and tattoos and wore leather jackets and worked in a record store, he wanted to marry Mom back at a time when the rest of their friends were still having drunken one-

night stands. 'Girlfriend is such a stupid word,' he said. 'I couldn’t stand calling her that. So, we had to get married, so I could call her ‘wife.’'

Mom, for her part, had a messed-up family. She did not go into the gory details with me, but I knew her father was long gone and for a while, she had been out of touch with her mother, though now we saw Gram’s and Papa Richard, which is what we called Mom’s stepfather, a couple of times a year.

So, Mom was taken not just with Dad but with the big, mostly intact, normal family he belonged to. She agreed to marry Dad even though they had been

together just a year. Of course, they still did it their way. They were married by a lesbian justice of the peace while their friends played a guitar feedback-heavy version of the 'Wedding March.' The bride wore a white-fringed flapper dress and black spiked boots. The groom wore leather.

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They got pregnant with me because of someone else’s wedding. One of Dad’s music friends who had moved to Seattle had gotten his girlfriend pregnant, so they were doing the shotgun thing. Mom and Dad went to the wedding, and at the reception, they got a little drunk

and back at the hotel were not as careful as usual. Three months later there was a thin blue line on the pregnancy test.

The way they tell it, neither felt particularly ready to be parents. Neither one felt like an adult yet. But there was no question that they would have me. Mom was Bethantly pro-choice. She had a bumper sticker on the car that read If you cannot trust me with a choice, how can you trust me with a child? But in her case, the choice was to keep me.

Dad was more hesitant. More freaked out. Until the minute the doctor pulled me out and then he started to cry.

'That’s poppycock,' he would say when Mom recounted the story. 'I did no such thing.'

'You didn’t cry then?' Mom asked in sarcastic amusement.

'I tore. I did not cry.' Then Dad winked at me and pantomimed weeping like a baby.

Because I was the only kid in Mom and Dad’s group of friends, I was a novelty. I was raised by the music community, with dozens of aunties and uncles who took me in as their little foundling, even after I started showing a strange preference for classical music. I

did not want a real family, either. Gram’s and Gramps lived nearby, and they were happy to take me for weekends so Mom and Dad could act wild and stay out all night for one of Dad’s shows.

Around the time I was four, my parents loved that they were doing it-raising a kid-even though they did not have a ton of money or 'real' jobs. We had a nice house with cheap rent. I had clothes (even if they were hand-me-downs from my cousins) and I was growing up happy and healthy. 'You were like an experiment,' Dad said. 'Surprisingly successful. We thought it must be a fluke.

We needed another kid as a kind of control group.'

They tried for four years. Mom got pregnant twice and had two miscarriages. They were sad about it, but they did not have the money to do all the fertility stuff that people do. By the time I was nine, they had decided that it was for the best. I was becoming independent. They stopped trying.

As if to convince themselves how great it was not to be tied down by a baby, Mom and Dad bought us tickets to visit New York for a week. It was supposed to be a musical pilgrimage. We would go to CBGB’s and Carnegie Hall.

But when to her surprise, Mom discovered she was pregnant, and then to her greater surprise, stayed pregnant past the first trimester, we had to cancel the trip. She was tired and sick to her stomach and so grumpy Dad joked that she would scare the New Yorkers. Besides, babies were expensive and we needed to save.

I did not mind. I was excited about a baby. And I knew that Carnegie Hall was not going anywhere. I would like to go there someday.

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5:41 P.M.

I am a little freaked out right now. Gram’s and Gramps left a while ago, but I stayed behind here in the ICU. I am sitting in one of the chairs, going over their conversation, which was genuinely nice and normal and not disturbing. Until they left. As Gram’s and Gramps walked out of the ICU, with me following, Gramps turned to Gram’s and asked: 'Do you think she decides?'

'Decides what?'

Gramps looked uncomfortable. He shuffled his feet. 'You know? Decides,' he whispered.

'What are you talking about?' Gram's sounded exasperated and tender at the same time.

'I don't know what I'm talking about.

You're the one who believes in all the angels.'

'What does that have to do with Earn?' Gram asked.

'If they are gone now, but still here, as you believe, what if they want her to join them? What if she wants to join them?'

'It doesn't work like that,' Gram snapped.

'Oh,' was all Gramps said. The inquiry was over.

After they left, I was thinking that one day I would tell Gram is that I never much bought into her theory that birds and such could be people's guardian angels. And now I am surer than ever that there is no such thing.

My parents are not here. They are not holding my hand or cheering me on. I know them well enough to know that if they could, they would. Not both. Maybe Mom would stay with Naddalin while Dad watched over me. But neither of them is here.

-And-

It is while contemplating this that I think about what the nurse said. She is running the show. And suddenly I understand what Gramps was asking Grams. He had listened to that nurse, too. He got it before I did.

If I stay. If I live. It is up to me.

All this business about medically induced comas is just doctor talk. It is not up to the doctors. It is not up to the absentee angels. It is not even up to God who, if He exists, is nowhere around right now. It is up to me.

How am I supposed to decide this?

How can I stay without Mom and Dad? How can I leave without Naddalin? Or Beth? This is too much. I do not even understand how it all works, why I am here in the state that I am in, or how to get out of it if I wanted to. If I were to say, I want to wake up, would I wake up right now? I already tried snapping my heels to find Naddalin and trying to beam myself to Hawaii, and that did not work.

This seems a whole lot more complicated.

But despite that, it is true. I hear the nurse’s words again. I am running the show. Everyone is waiting for me.

I decide. I know this now.

And this terrifies me more than anything else that has happened today.

Where is Beth?

A week before Halloween of my junior year, Beth showed up at my door triumphant. He was holding a dress bag and wearing a shirt-eating grin.

'Prepare to writhe in jealousy. I just got the best costume,' he said. He unzipped the bag. Inside was a frilly white shirt, a pair of breeches, and a long wool

coat with epaulets. 'You’re going to be Seinfeld with the puffy shirt?' I asked.

'Pff. Seinfeld. And you call yourself a classical musician. I am going to be Mozart. Wait, you haven’t seen the shoes.' He reached into the bag and pulled out clunky black leather numbers with metal bars across the tops.

'Nice,' I said. 'My mom has a pair like them.'

'You’re just jealous because you don’t have such a-rocking costume. And I will be wearing tights, too. I am just that secure in my adulthood. Also, I have a wig.'

'Where’d you get all this?' I asked, fingering the wig. It felt like it was made of burlap.

'Online. Only a hundred bucks.'

'You spent a hundred dollars on a Halloween costume?'

At the mention of the word Halloween, Naddalin zoomed down the stairs, ignoring me and yanking on Beth’s wallet chain. 'Wait here!' he demanded, and then ran back upstairs and returned a few seconds later holding a bag. 'Is this a good costume? Or will it make me look babyish?' Naddalin asked, pulling out a

pitchfork, a set of devil ears, a red tail, and a pair of red footie pajamas.

'OH.' Beth stepped backward; his eyes wide. 'That outfit scares the hell out of me and you aren’t even wearing it.'

'Really? You do not think the pajamas make it look dumb. I don’t want anyone to laugh at me,' Naddalin declared, his eyebrows furrowed in seriousness.

I grinned at Beth, who was trying to swallow his smile. 'Red pajamas plus pitchfork plus devil ears and the pointy tail is so fully satanic no one would dare

challenge you, lest they risk eternal damnation,' Beth assured him.

Naddalin’s face broke into a wide grin, showing off the gap of his missing front tooth. 'That is what Mom said, but I just wanted to make sure she wasn’t just telling me that so I wouldn’t bug her about the costume. You’re taking me trick-or-treating, right?' He looked at me now.

'Just like every year,' I answered.

'How else am I going to get candy?'

'You’re coming, too?' he asked Beth.

'I wouldn’t miss it.'

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Naddalin turned on his heel and whizzed back up the stairs. Beth turned to me. 'That’s Naddalin settled. What are you wearing?'

'Ahh, I’m not much of a costume girl.'

Beth rolled his eyes. 'Well, become one. It is Halloween, our first one together. Shooting Star has a big show that night. It’s a costumed concert, and you promised to go.'

Inwardly, I groaned. After six months with Beth, I had just gotten used

to us being the odd couple at school- people called us Groovy and the Geek. And I was starting to become more comfortable with Beth's bandmates, and had even learned a few words of rock talk. I could hold my own now when Beth took me to the House of Rock, the rambling house near the Middle School where the rest of the band all lived. I could even participate in the band's punk-rock pot-luck parties when everyone invited had to bring something from their fridge that was on the verge of spoiling. We took all the ingredients and made something out of it. I was good at finding ways to turn vegetarian ground beef,

beets, feta cheese, and apricots into something edible.

But that fall day, we fought with fists. After the last bell, without a word, we followed each other out to the playground, dropped our backpacks on the ground, which was wet from the day's steady drizzle. She charged me like a bull, knocking the wind out of me. I punched her on the side of the head, fist closed as men do. A crowd of kids gathered around to witness the spectacle. Fighting was novelty enough at our school. Girl-fighting was extra special. And good girls going at it was like hitting the trifecta.

By the time teachers separated us, half of the sixth grade was watching us (in fact, it was the ring of students loitering that alerted the playground monitors that something was up). The fight was a tie, I suppose. I had a split lip and a bruised wrist, the latter inflicted upon myself when my swing at Ana's shoulder missed her and landed squarely on the pole of the volleyball net. Ana had a swollen eye and a bad scrape on her thigh because of her tripping over her backpack as she attempted to kick me.

There was no heartfelt peacemaking, no official détente. Once the teachers separated us, Ana and I

looked at each other and started laughing. After finagling ourselves out of a visit to the principal's office, we limped home. Ana told me that the only reason that she volunteered for team captain was that if you did that at the beginning of a school year, coaches tended to remember and that kept them from picking you in the future (a handy trick I co-opted from then on). I explained to her that I agreed with her take on To Kill a Mockingbird, which was one of my favorite books. And then that was it. We were friends, just as everyone had assumed all along that we would be. We never laid a hand on each other again, and even though we would

get into plenty of verbal clashes, our tiffs tended to end the way our fistfight had, with us cracking up.

After our big brawl, though, Mrs. Schein refused to let Ana come over to my house, convinced that her daughter would return on crutches. Mom offered to go over and smooth things out, but I think that Dad and I both seed that given her temper, her diplomatic mission might end up with a restraining order against our family. In the end, Dad invited the Schein's over for a roast chicken dinner, and though you could see Mrs. Schein was still a little weirded out by my family-'So you work in a record store

while you study to become a teacher? And you do the cooking? How unusual,' she said to Dad-Mr. Schein declared my parents decent and our family nonviolent and told Ana’s mother that Ana ought to be allowed to come and go freely.

For those few months in sixth grade, Ana and I shed our good-girl personas. Talk about our fight circulated, the details growing more exaggerated-broken ribs, torn-off fingernails, bite marks. But when we came back to school after winter break, it was all forgotten. We were back to being the dark, quiet, good-girl twins.

We did not mind anymore. In fact, over the years that reputation has served us well. If, for instance, we were both absent on the same day, people automatically assumed we had come down with the same bug, not that we had ditched school to watch art films being shown in the film-survey class at the university. When, as a prank, someone put our school up for sale, covering it with signs and posting a listing on eBay, suspicious eyes turned to Nelson Baker and Jenna McLaughlin, not to us. Even if we had owned up to the prank-as we had planned to if anyone else got in trouble,

we would have had a tough time convincing anyone it was us.

40

This always made Ana laugh. 'People believe what they want to believe,' she said.

4:47 P.M.

Mom once snuck me into a casino. We were going on vacation to Crater Lake and we stopped at a resort on an Indian reservation for the buffet lunch. Mom decided to do a bit of gambling, and I went with her while Dad stayed with Naddalin, who was napping in his stroller. Mom sat down at the dollar blackjack

tables. The dealer looked at me, then at Mom, who returned his mildly suspicious glance with a look sharp enough to cut diamonds followed by a smile more brilliant than any gem. The dealer sheepishly smiled back and did not say a word. I watched Mom play, mesmerized. It seemed like we were in there for fifteen minutes but then Dad and Naddalin came in search of us, both grumpy. It turned out we had been there for over an hour.

The ICU is like that. You cannot tell what time of day it is or how much time has passed. There is no natural light. And there is a constant soundtrack of noise, only instead of the electronic

beeping of slot machines and the satisfying jangle of quarters, it is the hum and whir of all the medical equipment, the endless muffled pages over the PA, and the steady talk of the nurses.

I am not entirely sure how long I have been here. A while ago, the nurse I liked with the lilting accent said she was going home. 'I'll be back tomorrow, but I want to see you here, sweetheart,' she said. I thought that was weird at first. Wouldn't she want me to be home, or moved to another part of the hospital? But then I seed that she meant she wanted to see me in this ward, as opposed to dead.

The doctors keep coming around and pulling up my eyelids and waving around a flashlight. They are rough and hurried like they do not consider eyelids worthy of gentleness. It makes you see how little in life we touch one another's eyes. Your parents will hold an eyelid up to get out a piece of dirt, or your boyfriend will kiss your eyelids, light as a butterfly, just before you drift off to sleep. But eyelids are not like elbows, knees, or shoulders, parts of the body accustomed to being jostled.

The social worker is at my bedside now. She is looking through my chart and talking to one of the nurses who

normally sit at the big desk in the middle of the room. It is amazing the ways they watch you here. If they are not waving penlights in your eyes or reading the printouts that come tumbling out from the bedside printers, then they are watching your vitals from a central computer screen. If anything goes slightly amiss, one of the monitors starts bleeping. There is always an alarm going off somewhere. At first, it scared me, but now I see that half the time, when the alarms go off, it is the machines that are malfunctioning, not the people.

The social worker looks exhausted as if she would not mind

crawling into one of the open beds. I am not her only sick person. She has been shuttling back and forth between patients and families all afternoon. She is the bridge between the doctors and the people, and you can see the strain of balancing between those two worlds.

After she reads my chart and talks to the nurses, she goes back downstairs to my family, who have stopped talking in hushed tones and are now all engaged in solitary activities. Gram's is knitting. Gramps is pretending to nap. Aunt Diane playing sudoku. My cousins are taking turns on a Game Boy, the sound turned to mute.

Ana has left. When she came back to the waiting room after visiting the chapel, she found Mrs. Schein a total wreck. She seemed so embarrassed and she hustled her mother out. I think having Mrs. Schein there probably helped. Comforting her gave everyone else something to do, a way to feel useful. Now they are back to feeling useless, back to the endless wait.

When the social worker walks into the waiting room, everyone stands up, like they are greeting royalty. She gives me a half-smile, which I have seen her do several times already today. It is her signal that everything is okay or

status quo, and she is just here to deliver an update, not to drop a bomb.

'Earn is still unconscious, but her vital signs are improving,' she tells the assembled relatives, who have abandoned their distractions haphazardly on the chairs. 'She’s in with the respiratory therapists right now. They’re running tests to see how her lungs are functioning and whether she can be weaned off the ventilator.'

'That is good news, then?' Aunt Diane asks. 'I mean if she can breathe on her own, then she’ll wake up soon?'

The social worker gives a practiced sympathetic nod. 'It’s a good step if she can breathe on her own. It shows her lungs are healing and her internal injuries are stabbing. The question mark is still the brain contusions.'

'Why is that?' Cousin Heather interrupts.

'We don’t know when she will wake up on her own, or the extent of the damage to her brain. These first twenty-four hours are the most critical and Earn is getting the best possible care.'

'Can we see her?' Gramps asks.

The social worker nods. 'That’s why I’m here. I think it would be good for Earn to have a short visit. Just one or two people.' 'We’ll go,' Gram is says, stepping forward. Gramps is by her side.

'Yes, that’s what I thought,' the social worker says. 'We won’t be long,' she says to the rest of the family.

The three of them walk down the hall in silence. In the elevator, the social worker attempts to prepare my Grandparents for the sight of me, explaining the extent of my external injuries, which look bad but are treatable. It is the internal injuries that they are worried about, she says.

She is acting like my

Grandparents are children. But they are tougher than they look. Gramps was a medic in Korea. And Gram is, she is always rescuing things: birds with broken wings, a sick beaver, a deer hit by a car. The deer went to a wildlife sanctuary, which is funny because Gram’s usually hates deer; they eat up her garden. 'Pretty rats,' she calls them. 'Tasty rats' is what Gramps calls them when he grills up venison steaks. But that one deer, Gram’s, could not bear to see it suffer, so she rescued it. Part of me suspects she thought it was one of her angels.

Still, when they come through the automatic double doors into the ICU, both stop, as if repelled by an invisible barrier.

Gram takes Gramps’s hand, and I try to remember if I have ever seen them hold hands before. Grams scans the beds for me, but just as the social worker starts to point out where I am, Gramps sees me and he strides across the floor to my bed.

'Hello, duck,' he says. He has not called me that in ages, not since I was younger than Naddalin. Gram’s walks slowly to where I am, taking little gulps of air as she comes. Those wounded animals were not such good preps.

The social worker pulls over two chairs, setting them up at the foot of my bed. 'Earn, your Grandparents are here.' She motions for them to sit down. 'I'll leave you alone now.'

'Can she hear us?' Gram's asks. 'If we talk to her, she'll understand?'

'Truly, I don't know,' the social worker responds. 'But your presence can be soothing so long as what you say is soothing.' Then she gives them a stern look as if to tell them not to say anything bad to upset me. I know it is her job to warn them about things like this and that she is busy with a thousand things and

cannot always be so sensitive, but for a second, I hate her.

After the social worker leaves, Gram and Gramps sit in silence for a minute. Then Gram starts prattling on about the orchids she is growing in her greenhouse. I notice that she has changed out of her gardening smock into a clean pair of corduroy pants and a sweater. Someone must have stopped by her house to bring her fresh clothes. Gramps is sitting very still, and his hands are shaking. He is not much of a talker, so it must be hard for him to be ordered to chat with me now.

I opened my eyes, savoring the warm calm that was sweeping over me. I started to laugh. Beth did, too. We kissed for a while longer until it was time for him to go home.

As I walked him out to his car, I wanted to tell him that I loved him. But it seemed like such a cliché after what we had just done. So, I waited and told him the next day. 'That’s a relief. I thought you might just be using me for sex,' he joked, smiling.

After that, we still had our problems, but being overly polite to each other was not one of them.

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4:39 P.M.

I have quite the crowd now. Grams and Gramps. Uncle Dan. Aunt Diane. Aunt Kate. My cousins Heather, John, and David. Dad is one of five kids, so there are still lots more relatives out there. Nobody is talking about Naddalin, which leads me to believe that he is not here. He is still at the other hospital, being taken care of by Carrie.

The relatives gather in the hospital waiting room. Not the little one on the surgical floor where Gram's and Gramps were during my operation, but a

larger one on the hospital's main floor that is tastefully decorated in shades of mauve and has comfortable chairs and sofas and magazines that are almost current. Everyone still talks in hushed tones, as if being respectful of the other people waiting, even though it is only my family in the waiting room. It is all so serious, so ominous. I go back into the hallway to get a break.

I am so happy when Ana arrives; happy to see the familiar sight of her long black hair in a single braid. She wears the braid every day and always, by lunchtime, the curls and ringlets of her thick mane have managed to escape in rebellious

little tendrils. But she refuses to surrender to that hair of hers, and every morning, it goes back into the braid.

Ana’s mother is with her. She does not let Ana drive long distances, and after what has happened, there is no way she would make an exception today. Mrs. Schein is red-faced and blotchy like she has been crying or is about to cry. I know this because I have seen her cry many times. She is very emotional. 'Drama queen,' is how Ana puts it. 'It’s the Jewish-mother gene. She cannot help it. I suppose I’ll be like that one day, too,' Ana concedes.

Ana is so the opposite of that, so droll and funny in a low-key way that she is always having to say 'just kidding' to people who do not get her sarcastic sense of humor, that I cannot imagine her ever being like her mother. Then again, I do not have much basis for comparison. There are not a lot of Jewish mothers in our town or that many Jewish kids at our school. And the kids who are Jewish are usually only half, so all it means is that they have a menorah alongside their Christmas trees.

But Ana is Jewish. Sometimes I have Friday-night dinner with her family when they light candles, eat braided

bread, and drink wine (the only time I can imagine neurotic Mrs. Schein allowing Ana to drink). Ana's expected to only date Jewish guys, which means she does not date. She jokes that this is the reason her family moved here, when in fact it was because her father was hired to run a computer-chip plant. When she was thirteen, she had a bat mitzvah at a temple in Dauphin, and during the candle-lighting ceremony at the reception, I got called up to light one. Every summer, she goes to a Jewish sleepaway camp in New Jersey. It is called Camp Torah Habonim, but Ana calls it Torah Whore because all the kids do all summer is hooked up.

'Just like band camp,' she joked, though my summer conservatory program is nothing like American Pie.

Right now, I can see Ana is annoyed. She is walking fast, keeping a good ten feet between her and her mother as they march down the halls. Suddenly her shoulders go up like a cat that has just spied on a dog. She swerves to face her mother.

'Stop it!' Ana demands. 'If I’m not crying, there’s no freaking way you’re allowed to.'

Ana never curses. So, this shocks me.

'But,' Mrs. Schein protests, 'how can you be so...' -sob-'so calm when-'

'Cut it out!' Ana interjects. 'Earn is still here. So, I am not losing it. And if I do not lose it, you don’t get to!'

Ana stalks off in the direction of the waiting room, her mother following limply behind. When they reach the waiting room and see my assembled family, Mrs. Schein starts sniffling.

Ana does not curse this time. But her ears go pink, which is how I know she is still furious. 'Mother. I am going to leave you here. I am taking a walk. I’ll be back later.'

I follow her back out into the corridor. She wanders around the main lobby, loops around the gift shop, visits the cafeteria. She looks at the hospital directory. I know where she is headed before she does.

There is a small chapel in the basement. It is hushed in there, a library quiet. There are plush chairs like the kind you find at a movie theater, and a muted soundtrack playing some New Agey-type music.

Ana slumps back in one of the chairs. She takes off her coat, the one that is black and velvet and that I have coveted since she bought it at some mall

in New Jersey on a trip to visit her Grandparents.

'I love Oregon,' she says with a hiccup attempt at a laugh. I can tell by her sarcastic tone that it is me she is talking to, not God. 'This is the hospital's idea of nondenominational.' She points around the chapel. There is a crucifix mounted on the wall, a flag of a cross draped over the lectern, and a few paintings of the Madonna and Child hanging in the back. 'We have a token Star of David,' she says, gesturing to the six-pointed star on the wall. 'But what about the Muslims? No prayer rugs or symbols to show which way is east toward

Mecca? And what about the Buddhists? Couldn’t they spring for a gong? I mean there are probably more Buddhists than Jews in Dauphin anyway.'

I sit down in a chair beside her. It feels so natural the way that Ana is talking to me like she always does. Other than the paramedic who told me to hang in there and the nurse who keeps asking me how I am doing, no one has talked to me since the accident.

They talk about me.

I have never actually seen Ana pray. I mean, she prayed at her bat mitzvah, and she does the blessings at

Shabbat dinner, but that is because she must. Mostly, she makes light of her religion. But after she talks to me for a while, she closes her eyes and moves her lips, and murmurs things in a language I do not understand.

She opens her eyes and wipes her hands together as if to say enough of that. Then she reconsiders and adds a final appeal. 'Please don’t die. I can understand why you’d want to, but think about this: If you die, there’s going to be one of those cheesy Princess Diana memorials at school, where everyone puts flowers, candles, and notes next to your locker.' She wipes away a renegade tear

with the back of her hand. 'I know you'd hate that kind of thing.'

42

It was because we were too alike. As soon as Ana showed up on the scene, everyone assumed we would be best friends just because we were both dark, quiet, studious, and, at least outwardly, serious. The thing was, neither one of us was a particularly great student (straight B averages all around) or, for that matter, all that serious. We were serious about certain things-music in my case, art, and photography in hers-and in the simplified world of middle school, that was enough

to set us apart as separated twins of some sort.

Immediately we got shoved together for everything. On Ana’s third day of school, she was the only person to volunteer to be a team captain during a soccer match in PE, which I had thought was beyond suck-up-p-y of her. As she put on her red jersey, the coach scanned the class to pick Team B’s captain, his eyes settling on me, even though I was one of the least athletic girls. As I shuffled over to put on my jersey, I brushed past Ana, mumbling 'thanks a lot.'

The following week, our English teacher paired us together for a joint oral

discussion on To Kill a Mockingbird. We sat across from each other in stony silence for about ten minutes. Finally, I said. 'I guess we should talk about racism in the Old South or something.'

Ana ever so slightly rolled her eyes, which made me want to throw a dictionary at her. I was caught off guard by how intensely I already hated her. 'I read this book at my old school,' she said. 'The racism thing is kind of obvious. The biggest thing is people’s goodness. Are they naturally good and turned bad by stuff like racism or are they naturally bad and need to work hard not to be?'

'Whatever,' I said. 'It’s a stupid book.' I

did not know why I had said that because I had loved the book and had talked to Dad about it; he was using it for his student teaching. I hated Ana even more for making me betray a book I loved.

'Fine. We'll do your idea, then,' Ana said, and when we got a B minus, she seemed to Gallet about our mediocre grade.

After that, we just did not talk. That did not stop teachers from pairing us together or everyone in the school from assuming that we were friends. The more that happened, the more we resented it- and each other. The more the world shoved us together, the more we shoved

back-and against each other. We tried to pretend the other did not exist even though the existence of our nemeses kept us both occupied for hours.

I felt compelled to give myself reasons why I hated Ana: She was a Goody Two-shoes. She was annoying. She was a show-off. Later, I found out that she did the same thing about me, though her major complaint was that she thought I was a bitch. And one day, she even wrote it to me. In English class, someone flung a folded-up square of notebook paper onto the floor next to my right foot. I picked it up and opened it. It read, Bitch!

Nobody had ever called me that before, and though I was automatically furious, deep down I was also flattered that I had elicited enough emotion to be worthy of the name. People called Mom that a lot, probably because she had a tough time holding her tongue and could be brutally blunt when she disagreed with you. She would explode like a thunderstorm, and then be fine again. Anyhow, she did not care that people called her a bitch. 'It’s just another word for feminist,' she told me with pride. Even Dad called her that sometimes, but always in a jokey, complimentary way. Never during a fight. He knew better.

I looked up from my grammar book.

There was only one person who would have sent this note to me, but I still scarcely believed it. I peered at the class. Everyone had their faces in their books. Except for Ana. Her ears were so red that it made the little sideburn-like tendrils of dark hair look like they were also blushing. She was glaring at me. I might have been eleven years old and a little socially immature, but I recognized a gauntlet being thrown down when I saw it, and I had no choice but to take it up.

When we got older, we liked to joke that we were so glad we had that

fistfight. Not only did it cement our friendship, but it also provided us with our first and the only opportunity for a good brawl. When else were two girls like us going to come to blows? I wrestled on the ground with Naddalin, and sometimes I pinched him, but a fistfight? He was just a baby, and even if he were older, Naddalin was like half kid brother and half my kid. I had been babysitting him since he was a few weeks old. I could never hurt him like that. And Ana, an only child, did not have any siblings to the sock. At camp, she could have gotten into a scuffle, but the consequences would have been dire: hours-long conflict-

resolution seminars with the counselors and the rabbi. 'My people know how to fight with the best of them, but with words, with lots and lots of words,' she told me once.

There are so many tubes attached to me that I cannot count them all: one down my throat breathing for me; one down my nose, keeping my stomach empty; one in my vein, hydrating me; one in my bladder, peeing for me; several on my chest, recording my heartbeat; another on my finger, recording my pulse. The ventilator that is doing my breathing has a soothing rhythm like a metronome, in, out, in, out.

No one, aside from the doctors and nurses and a social worker, has been in to see me. It is the social worker who speaks to Grams and Gramps in hushed sympathetic tones. She tells them that I am in 'grave' condition. I am not entirely sure what that means-grave. On TV, patients are always critical, or stable. Grave sounds bad. The grave is where you go when things do not work out here.

'I wish there were something we could do,' Gram says. 'I feel so useless just waiting.'

'I'll see if I can get you in to see her in a little while,' the social worker says. She has frizzy gray hair and a coffee

stain on her blouse; her face is kind. 'She’s still sedated from the surgery and she’s on a ventilator to help her breathe while her body heals from the trauma. But it can be helpful even for patients in a comatose state to hear from their loved ones.'

Gramps grunts in reply.

'Do you have any people you can call?' the social worker asks. 'Relatives who might like to be here with you. I understand this must be quite a trial for you, but the stronger you can be, the more it will help Earn.'

I startle when I hear the social worker say my name. It is a jarring reminder that it is me they are talking about. Gram tells her about the various people who are en route right now, aunts, uncles. I do not hear any mention of Beth.

Beth is the one I want to see. I wish I knew where he was so I could try to go there. I have no idea how he is going to find out about me. Grams and Gramps do not have his phone number. They do not carry cell phones, so he cannot call them. And I do not know how he would even know to call them. The people who would normally pass along pertinent information that something has

happened to me are in no position to do that.

I stand over the bleeping tubed lifeless form that is me. My skin is gray. My eyes are taped shut. I wish someone would take the tape off. It looks like it itches. The nice nurse bustles over. Her scrubs have lollipops on them, even though this is not a pediatric unit. 'How is it going, sweetheart?' she asks me as if we just bumped into each other in the grocery store.

It did not start so smoothly with Beth and me. I had this notion that love conquers all. And by the time he dropped me off from the Yo-Yo Ma concert, we

were both aware that we were falling in love. I thought that getting to this part was the challenge. In books and movies, the stories always end when the two people finally have their romantic kiss. The happily-ever-after part is just assumed.

It did not work that way for us. It turned out that coming from such far corners of the social universe had its downsides. We continued to see each other in the music wing, but these interactions remained platonic as if neither one of us wanted to mess with a good thing. But whenever we met at other places in the school-when we sat together

in the cafeteria or studied side by side on the quad on a sunny day-something was off. We were uncomfortable. The conversation was stilted. One of us would say something and the other would start to say something else at the same time.

'You go,' I would say.

'No, you go,' Beth would say.

The politeness was painful. I wanted to push through it, to return to the Gallow of the night of the concert, but I was unsure of how to get back there.

Beth invited me to see his band play. This was even worse than school. If I felt like a fish out of water in my family, I

felt like a fish on Mars in Beth's circle. He was always surrounded by funky, lively people, by cute girls with dyed hair and piercings, by aloof guys who perked up when Beth rock-talked with them. I could not do the groupie thing. And I did not know how to rock-talk at all. It was a language I should have understood, being both a musician and Dad's daughter, but I did not. It was like how Mandarin speakers can sort of understanding Cantonese but not really, even though non-Chinese people assume all Chinese can communicate with one another, even though Mandarin and Cantonese are different.

I dreaded going to shows with Beth. It was not that I was jealous. Or that I was not into his kind of music. I loved to watch him play. When he was on stage, it was like the guitar was a fifth limb, a natural extension of his body. And when he came offstage afterward, he would be sweaty but it was such a clean sweat that part of me was tempted to lick the side of his face like it was a lollipop. I did not, though.

Once the fans descend, I would skitter off to the sidelines. Beth would try to draw me back, to wrap an arm around my waist, but I would disentangle myself and head back to the shadows.

'Don’t you like me anymore?' Beth chided me after one show. He was kidding, but I could hear the hurt behind the offhand question.

'I don’t know if I should keep coming to your shows,' I said.

'Why not?' he asked. This time he did not try to disguise the hurt.

'I feel like I keep you from basking in it all. I don’t want you to have to worry about me.'

Beth said that he did not mind worrying about me, but I could tell that part of him did.

We would have broken up in those early weeks were it not for my house. At my house, with my family, we found common ground. After we had been together for a month, I took Beth home with me for his first family dinner with us. He sat in the kitchen with Dad, rock-talking. I observed, and I still did not understand half of it, but unlike at the shows I did not feel left out.

'Do you play basketball?' Dad asked. When it came to observing sports, Dad was a baseball fanatic, but when it came to playing, he loved to shoot hoops.

'Sure,' Beth said. 'I mean, I’m not particularly good.'

'You don’t need to be good; you just need to be committed. Want to play a quick game? You already have your basketball shoes on,' Dad said, looking at Beth’s Converse high-tops. Then he turned to me. 'You mind?'

'Not at all,' I said, smiling. 'I can practice while you play.'

They went out to the courts behind the nearby elementary school. They returned forty-five minutes later. Beth was covered with a sheen of sweat and looking a little dazed.

'What happened?' I asked. 'Did the old man whoop you?'

Beth shook his head and nodded at the same time. 'Well, yes. But it is not that. I got stung by a bee on my palm while we were playing. Your dad grabbed my hand and sucked the venom out.'

I nodded. This was a trick he had learned from Gram’s, and unlike with rattlesnakes, it worked on bee stings. You got the stinger and the venom out, so you were left with only a little itch.

Beth broke into an embarrassed smile. He leaned in and whispered into my ear: 'I think I’m a little wigged out that I’ve been more intimate with your dad than I have with you.'

I laughed at that. But it was true. In the few weeks we had been together, we had not done much more than a kiss. It was not that I was a prude. I was a virgin, but I certainly was not devoted to staying that way. And Beth certainly was not a virgin. It was more than our kissing had suffered from the same painful politeness as our conversations.

'Maybe we should remedy that,' I murmured.

Beth raised his eyebrows as if asking me a question. I blushed in response. All through dinner, we grinned at each other as we listened to Naddalin, who was chattering about the dinosaur

bones he had dug up in the back garden that afternoon. Dad had made his famous salt roast, which was my favorite dish, but I had no appetite. I pushed the food around my plate, hoping no one would notice. All the while, this little buzz was building inside me. I thought of the tuning fork I used to adjust my French horn. Hitting it sets off vibrations in the note of a vibration that keeps growing and growing until the harmonic pitch fills up the room. That is what Beth's grin was doing to me during dinner.

After the meal, Beth took a quick peek at Naddalin's fossil finds, and then we went upstairs to my room and closed

the door. Ana is not allowed to be alone in her house with boys-not that the opportunity ever came up. My parents had never mentioned any rules on this issue, but I had a feeling that they knew what was happening with Beth and me, and even though Dad liked to play it all Father Knows Best he and Mom were suckers when it came to love.

Beth lay down on my bed, stretching his arms above his head. His whole face was grinning-eyes, nose, mouth. 'Play me,' he said.

'What?'

'I want you to play me like a French horn.'

I started to protest that this made no sense, but then I seed it made perfect sense. I went to my closet and grabbed one of my spare bows. 'Take off your shirt,' I said, my voice quavering.

Beth did. As thin as he was, he was surprisingly built. I could have spent twenty minutes staring at the contours and valleys of his chest. But he wanted me closer. I wanted me closer.

I sat down next to him on the bed so his long body was stretched out in front of me. The bow trembled as I placed

it on the bed. I reached with my left hand and caressed

Beth’s head as if it were the scroll of my French horn. He smiled again and closed his eyes. I relaxed a little. I fiddled with his ears as though they were the string pegs and then I playfully tickled him as he laughed softly. I placed two fingers on Beth’s apple. Then, taking a deep breath for courage, I plunged into his chest. I ran my hands up and down the length of his torso, focusing on the sinews in his muscles, assigning each one a string-A, G, C, D. I traced them down, one at a time, with the tip of my fingers. Beth

got quiet then as if he were concentrating on something.

I reached for the bow and brushed it across his hips, where I imagined the bridge of the French horn would be. I played lightly at first and then with more force and speed as the song now playing in my head increased in intensity. Beth lay perfectly still, little groans escaping from his lips. I looked at the bow, looked at my hands, looked at Beth's face, and felt this surge of love, lust, and an unfamiliar feeling of power. I had never known that I could make someone feel this way.

When I finished, he stood up and kissed me long and deep. 'My turn,' he said. He pulled me to my feet and started by slipping the sweater over my head and edging down my jeans. Then he sat down on the bed and laid me across his lap. At first Beth did nothing except hold me. I closed my eyes and tried to feel his eyes on my body, seeing me as no one else ever had.

Then he began to play.

He strummed chords across the top of my chest, which tickled and made me laugh. He gently brushed his hands, moving farther down. I stopped giggling. The tuning fork intensified-its vibrations

growing every time Beth touched me somewhere new.

After a while, he switched to more of a Spanish-style, fingerpicking type of playing. He used the top of my body as the fretboard, caressing my hair, my face, my neck. He plucked at my chest and my belly, but I could feel him in places his hands were nowhere near. As he played on, the energy magnified; the tuning fork going crazy now, firing off vibrations all over, until my entire body was humming, until I was left breathless. And when I felt like I could not take it one more minute, the swirl of sensations hit a

dizzying crescendo, sending every nerve ending in my body on high alert.

The anesthesiologist has gentle fingers. She sits at my head, keeping an eye on all my vitals, adjusting the amounts of the fluids, gases, and drugs they are giving me. She must be doing an excellent job because I do not appear to feel anything, even though they are yanking at my body. It is rough and messy work, nothing like that game Operation we used to play as kids where you had to be careful not to touch the sides as you removed a bone, or the buzzer would go off.

The anesthesiologist absentmindedly strokes my temples through her latex Galleries. This is what Mom used to do when I came down with the flu or got one of those headaches that hurt so bad, I used to imagine cutting open a vein in my temple just to relieve the pressure.

The Wagner CD has been repeated twice now. The doctors decide it is time for a new genre. Jazz wins. People always assume that because I am into classical music, I am a jazz aficionado. I am not. Dad is. He loves it, especially the wild, latter-day Coltrane stuff. He says that jazz is punk for old people. That

explains it because I do not like punk, either.

The operation goes on and on. I am exhausted by it. I do not know how the doctors have the stamina to keep up. They are standing still, but it seems harder than running a marathon.

I start to zone out. And then I start to wonder about this state I am in. If I am not dead and the heart monitor is bleeping along, so I assume I am not, but I am not in my body, either can I go anywhere? Am I a ghost? Could I transport myself to a beach in Hawaii? Can I pop over to Carnegie Hall in New York City?

Can I go to Naddalin?

Just for the sake of experiment, I wiggle my nose like Samantha on Bewitched. Nothing happens. I snap my fingers. Click my heels. I am still here.

I decided to try a simpler maneuver. I walk into the wall, imagining that I will float through it and come out on the other side. Except that what happens when I walk into the wall is that I hit a wall.

A nurse bustles in with a bag of Ritalin, and before the door shuts behind her, I slip through it. Now I am in the hospital corridor. There are lots of

doctors and nurses in blue and green scrubs hustling around. A woman on a gurney, her hair in a gauzy blue shower cap, an IV in her arm, calls out, 'William, William.' I walk a little farther. There are rows of operating rooms, all full of sleeping people. If the patients inside these rooms are like me, why then cannot I see the people outside the people? Is everyone else loitering about like I seem to be? I would Gram like to meet someone in my condition. I have some questions, like, what is this state I am in exactly and how do I get out of it? How do I get back to my body? Do I have to wait for the doctors to wake me up? But there is no

one else like me around. The rest of them figured out how to get to Hawaii.

I follow a nurse through a set of automatic double doors. I am in a small waiting room now. My Grandparents are here.

Gram's is chattering away to Gramps, or just to the air. It is her way of not letting emotion get the best of her. I have seen her do it before when Gramps had a heart attack. She is wearing her Wellies and her gardening smock, which is smudged with mud. She must have been working in her greenhouse when she heard about us. Gram's hair is short, curly, and gray; she has been wearing it

in a permanent wave, Dad says, since the 1970s. 'It’s easy,' Gram says. 'No muss, no fuss.' This is so typical of her. No nonsense. She is so quintessentially practical that most people would never guess she has a thing for angels.

She keeps a collection of ceramic angels, yarn doll angels, blown-glass angels, you-name-it angels, in a special china hutch in her sewing room. And she does not just collect angels; she believes in them. She thinks that they are everywhere. Once, a pair of loons nested in the pond in the woods behind their house. Gram was convinced that it was

her long-dead parents, come to watch over her.

Another time, we were sitting outside on her porch and I saw a red bird. 'Is that a red crossbill?' I had asked Grams.

She had shaken her head. 'My sister Galleria is a crossbill,' Gram's had said, referring to my recently deceased great-aunt Galle, with whom Gram's had never gotten along. 'She wouldn't be coming around here.'

Gramps is staring into the dregs of his Styrofoam cup, peeling away the top of it so that little white balls collect in

his lap. I can tell it is the worst kind of swill, the kind that looks like it was brewed in 1997 and has been sitting on a burner ever since. Even so, I would not mind a cup.

You can draw a straight line from Gramps to Dad to Naddalin, although Gramps's wavy hair has gone from blond-haired person to gray and he is stockier than Naddalin, who is a stick, and Dad, who is wiry and muscular from afternoon weight-lifting sessions at the Y. But they all have the same watery gray-blue eyes, the color of the ocean on a cloudy day.

Therefore, I now find it hard to look at Gramps.

Juilliard was Gram's idea. She is from Massachusetts originally, but she moved to Oregon in 1955, on her own. Now that would be no big deal, but fifty-two years it was scandalous for a twenty-two-year-old unmarried woman to do that. Grams claimed she was drawn to the wild open wilderness, and it did not get wilder than the endless forests and craggy beaches of Oregon. She got a job as a secretary working for the Forest Service. Gramps was working there as a biologist.

We go back to Massachusetts sometimes in the summers, to a lodge in the western part of the state that for one week is taken over by Grams extended

family. That is when I see my second cousins and great aunts and uncles whose names I barely recognize. I have lots of family in Oregon, but they are all from Gramps's side.

Last summer at the Massachusetts retreat, I brought my French horn so I could keep up my practicing for an upcoming chamber-music concert. The flight was not full, so the flight attendants let it travel in a seat next to me, just like the pros do it. Naddalin thought this was hilarious and kept trying to feed its pretzels.

At the lodge, I gave a little concert one night, in the main room, with

my relatives and the dead game animals mounted on the wall as my audience. It was after that that someone mentioned Juilliard, and Gram is became taken with the idea.

At first, it seemed far-fetched. There was a perfectly good music program at the university near us. And, if I wanted to stretch, there was a conservatory in Seattle, which was only a few hours' drives. Juilliard was across the country. And expensive. Mom and Dad were intrigued by the idea of it, but I could tell neither one of them wanted to relinquish me to New York City or go into hock so that I could become a cellist for

some second-rate small-town orchestra. They had no idea whether I was good enough. In fact, neither did I. Professor Kristiee told me that I was one of the most promising students she had ever taught, but she had never mentioned Juilliard to me. Juilliard was for virtuoso musicians, and it seemed arrogant to even think that they would give me a second glance.

But after the retreat, when someone else, someone impartial and from the East Coast, deemed me Juilliard-worthy, the idea burrowed into Gram's brain. She took it upon herself to speak to Professor Kristiee about it, and my

teacher took hold of the idea like a terrier to a bone.

So, I filled out my application, collected my letters of recommendation, and sent in a recording of my playing. I did not tell Beth about any of this. I had told myself that it was because there was no point advertising it when even getting an audition was such a long shot. But even then, I had recognized that for the lie that it was. A small part of me felt like even applying was betrayal.

Juilliard was in New York. Beth was here.

But not in high school anymore. He was a year ahead of me, and this past year, my senior year, he had started at the university in town. He only went to school part-time now because Shooting Star was starting to get popular. There was a record deal with a Seattle-based label and a lot of traveling to gigs. So only after I got the creamy envelope embossed with The Juilliard School and a letter inviting me to audition did, I tell Beth that I had applied. I explained how many people did not get that far. At first, he looked a little awestruck, like he could not believe it. Then he gave a sad little smile.

'Yo- Mama better watches his back,' he said.

The auditions were held in San Francisco. Dad had a big conference at the school that week and could not get away, and Mom had just started a new job at the travel agency, so Gram is volunteering to accompany me. 'We'll make a girl' weekend of it. Take high tea at the Fairmont. Go window-shopping in Union Square. Ride the ferry to

Alcatraz. We'll be tourists.'

But a week before we were due to leave, Gram's tripped over a tree root and sprained her ankle. She had to wear one

of those clunky boots and was not supposed to walk. A minor panic ensued. I said I could just go by myself-drive, or take the train, and come right back.

It was Gramps who insisted on taking me. We drove down together in his pickup truck. We did not talk much, which was fine with me because I was so nervous. I kept fingering the Popsicle-stick good-luck talisman Naddalin had presented me with before we left. 'Break an arm,' he had told me.

Gramps and I listened to classical music and farm reports on the radio when we could pick up a station. Otherwise, we sat in silence. But it was such a calming

silence; it made me relax and feel closer to him than any heart-to-heart would have.

Gram had booked us in a frilly inn, and it was funny to see Gramps in his work boots and plaid flannel amid all the lacy doilies and potpourri. But he took it all in stride.

The audition was grueling. I had to play five pieces: a Shostakovich concerto, two Bach suites, all Tchaikovsky's Pezzo capriccioso, which was next to impossible, and a movement from Ennio Morricone's The Mission, a fun but risky choice because Yo-Yo Ma had covered this and everyone would

compare. I walked out with my legs wobbly and my underarms wet with sweat. But my endorphins were surging and that, combined with the huge sense of relief, left me giddy.

'Shall we see the town?' Gramps asked, his lips twitching into a smile.

'Definitely!'

We did all the things Gram had promised we would do. Gramps took me to high tea and shopping, although for dinner, we skipped out on the reservations Gram's had made at some fancy place on Fisherman's Wharf and instead wandered into Chinatown, looking

for the restaurant with the longest line of people waiting outside, and ate there.

When we got back home, Gramps dropped me off and enveloped me in a hug. Normally, he was a handshake, a back patter on special occasions. His hug was strong and tight, and I knew it was his way of telling me that he had had a wonderful time.

'Me, too, Gramps,' I whispered.

3:47 P.M.

They just moved me out of the recovery room into the trauma intensive-care unit or ICU. It is a horseshoe-shaped room with about a dozen beds and a

cadre of nurses, who constantly bustle around, reading the computer printouts that churn out from the feet of our beds recording our vital signs. In the middle of the room are more computers and a big desk, where another nurse sits.

I have two nurses who check in on me, along with the endless round of doctors.

One is a taciturn doughy man with blond hair and a mustache, who I do not much like. And the other is a woman with skin so black it is blue and a lilt in her voice. She calls me 'sweetheart' and perpetually straightens the blankets

around me, even though it is not like I am kicking them off.

'Have you ever heard of this Yo-Yo Ma man?' Beth asked me. It was the spring of my sophomore year, which was his junior year. By then, Beth had been watching me practice in the music wing for several months. Our school was public, but one of those progressive ones that always got written up in national magazines because of its emphasis on the arts. We did get a lot of free periods to paint in the studio or practice music. I spent mine in the soundproof booths of the music wing. Beth was there a lot, too, playing guitar.

Not the electric guitar he played in his band.

Just acoustic melodies.

I rolled my eyes. 'Everyone’s heard of Yo-Yo Ma.'

Beth grinned. I noticed for the first time that his smile was lopsided, his mouth sloping up on one side. He hooked his ringed thumb out toward the quad. 'I don’t think you’ll find five people out there who’ve heard of Yo-Yo Ma. And what kind of name is that? Is it ghetto or something? Yo

Mama?'

'It’s Chinese.'

Beth shook his head and laughed. 'I know plenty of Chinese people. They have names like Wei Chin. Or Lee something. Not Yo-Yo Ma.'

'You cannot be blaspheming the master,' I said. But then I laughed despite myself. It had taken me a few months to believe that Beth was not taking the piss out of me, and after that, we had started having these little conversations in the corridor.

Still, his attention baffled me. It was not that Beth was such a popular guy. He was not a jock or a most-likely-to-succeed sort. But he was cool. Cool in that he played in a band with people who

went to the Middle School in town. Cool in that he had his rockery style, procured from thrift stores and garage sales, not from Urban Outfitters knock-offs. Cool in that he seemed happy to sit in the lunchroom absorbed in a book, not just pretending to read because he did not have anywhere to sit or anyone to sit with. That was not the case at all. He had a small group of friends and a large group of admirers.

And it was not like I was a dork, either. I had friends and a best friend to sit with at lunch. I had other good friends at the music conservatory camp I went to in the summer.

People liked me well enough, but they also did not know me. I was quiet in class. I did not raise my hand a lot or say the teachers. And I was busy, much of my time spent practicing or playing in a string quartet or taking theory classes at the community Middle School. Kids were nice enough to me, but they tended to treat me as if I were a grown-up. Another teacher. And you do not flirt with your teachers.

'What would you say if I said I had tickets to the master?' Beth asked me, a glint in his eyes.

'Shut up. You do not,' I said, shoving him a little harder than I'd meant to.

Beth pretended to fall against the glass wall. Then he dusted himself off. 'I do. At the Schnitzle place in Dauphin.'

'It's the Arlene Schnitzer Hall. It's part of the Symphony.'

'That's the place. I got the tickets. A pair. You interested?'

'Are you serious? Yes! I was dying to go but they were like eighty dollars each. Wait, how did you get tickets?'

'A friend of the family gave them to my parents, but they can't go. It's no

important thing,' Beth said quickly. 'Anyhow, it’s Friday night. If you want, I’ll pick you up at five-thirty and we’ll drive to Dauphin together.'

'Okay,' I said like it was the most natural thing.

By Friday afternoon, though, I was more jittery than when I had inadvertently drunk a whole pot of Dad’s tar-strong coffee while studying for finals last winter.

It was not Beth making me nervous. I had grown comfortable enough around him by now.

It was uncertainty. What was this, exactly? A date? A friendly favor? An act of charity? I did not like being on the soft ground any more than I liked fumbling my way through a new movement. That is why I practiced so much, so I could rush myself to solid ground and then work out the details from there.

I changed my clothes about six times. Naddalin, a kindergartner back then, sat in my bedroom, pulling the Calvin and Hobbes books down from the shelves and pretending to read them. He cracked himself up, though I was not sure whether it was Calvin's high jinks or my own making him so silly.

Mom popped her head in to check on my progress. 'He’s just a guy, Earn,' she said when she saw me getting worked up.

'Yes, but he’s just the first guy I’ve ever gone on a maybe-date with,' I said. 'So, I don’t know whether to wear date clothes or symphony clothes-do people here even dress up for that kind of thing? Or should I just keep it casual in case it’s not a date?'

'Just wear something you feel good in,' she suggested. 'That way you’re covered.' I am sure Mom would have tried hard had she been me. In the pictures of her and Dad from the early days, she

looked like a cross between a 1930s siren and a biker chick, with her pixie haircut, her big blue eyes coated with kohl eyeliner, and her rail-thin body always ensconced in some sexy getup, like a lacy vintage camisole paired with skintight leather pants.

I sighed. I wished I could be so gutsy. In the end, I chose a long black skirt and a maroon short-sleeved sweater. Plain and simple. My trademark, I guess.

When Beth showed up in a sharkskin suit and Creepers (an ensemble that impressed Dad), I saw that this was a date. Of course, Beth would choose to dress up for the symphony and a 1960s

sharkskin suit could have just been his cool take on formal, but I knew there was more to it than that. He seemed nervous as he shook hands with my dad and told him that he had his band’s old CDs. 'To use as coasters, I hope,' Dad said. Beth looked surprised, unused to the parent being more sarcastic than the child, I imagine.

'Don’t you kids get too crazy. Bad injuries at the last Yo-Yo Ma mosh pit,' Mom called as we walked down the lawn.

'Your parents are so cool,' Beth said, opening the car door for me.

'I know,' I replied.

We drove to Dauphin, making small talk. Beth played me snippets of bands he liked; a Swedish pop trio that sounded monotonous but then some Icelandic art band that was quite beautiful. We got a little-lost downtown and made it to the concert hall with only a few minutes to spare.

Our seats were on the balcony. Nosebleeds. But you do not go to Yo-Yo Ma for the view, and the sound was incredible. That man has a way of making the French horn sound like a crying woman one minute, a laughing child the next. Listening to him, I am always reminded of why I started playing the

French horn in the first place that there is something so human and expressive about it.

When the concert started, I peered at Beth out of the corner of my eye. He seemed good-natured enough about the whole thing, but he kept looking at his program, counting off the movements until intermission. I worried that he was bored, but after a while, I got too caught up in the music to care.

Then, when Yo-Yo Ma played 'Le Gram’s Tango,' Beth reached over and grasped my hand. In any other context, this would have been cheesy, the old yawn-and-cop-a-feel move. But Beth was

not looking at me. His eyes were closed and he was swaying slightly in his seat. He was lost in the music, too. I squeezed his hand back and we sat there like that for the rest of the concert.

Afterward, we bought coffees and doughnuts and walked along the river. It was missing and he took off his suit jacket and draped it over my shoulders.

'You didn’t get those tickets from a family friend, did you?' I asked.

I thought he would laugh or throw up his arm in mock surrender like he did when I beat him in an argument. But he looked straight at me, so I could

see the green and browns and grays swimming around in his irises. He shook his head. 'That was two weeks of pizza-delivery tips,' he admitted.

I stopped walking. I could hear the water lapping below. 'Why?' I asked. 'Why me?'

'I’ve never seen anyone get as into music as you do. It is why I like to watch you practice. You get the cutest crease in your forehead, right there,' Beth said, touching me above the bridge of my nose. 'I’m obsessed with music and even I don’t get transported as you do.'

'So, what? I’m like a social experiment to you?' I meant it to be jokey, but it came out sounding bitter.

'No, you’re not an experiment,' Beth said. His voice was husky and choked.

I felt the heat flood my neck and I could sense myself blushing. I stared at my shoes. I knew that Beth was looking at me now with as much certainty as I knew that if I looked up, he was going to kiss me. And it took me by surprise how much I wanted to be kissed by him, um really, I had thought about it so often that I had memorized the exact shape of his lips,

that I had imagined running my finger down the cleft of his chin.

My eyes flickered upward. Beth was there waiting for me.

That was how it started.

12:19 P.M.

There are a lot of things wrong with me.

I have a collapsed lung. A ruptured spleen. Internal bleeding of unknown origin. And most serious, the contusions on my brain. I have also got broken ribs. Abrasions on my legs, which will require skin grafts; and on my face, which will require cosmetic surgery but,

as the doctors note, that is only if I am lucky.

Right now, in surgery, the doctors must remove my spleen, insert a new tube to drain my collapsed lung, and stanch whatever else might be causing the internal bleeding.

There is not a lot they can do for my brain.

'We'll just wait and see,' one of the surgeons says, looking at the CAT scan of my head. 'In the meantime, call down to the Ritalin bank. I need two units of O to neg and keep two units ahead.'

O negative… My Ritalin type… I had no idea. It is not like it is something I have ever had to think about before. I have never been in the hospital unless you count the time, I went to the emergency room after I cut my ankle on some broken glass. I did not even need stitches then, just a tetanus shot.

In the operating room, the doctors are debating what music to play, just like we were in the car this morning. One guy wants jazz. Another wants to rock. The anesthesiologist, who stands near my head, requests classical. I root for her, and I feel like that must help because someone pops on a Wagner CD,

although I do not know that the rousing 'Ride of the Valkyries' is what I had in mind. I had hoped for something a little lighter.

Four Seasons.

The operating room is small and crowded, full of blindingly bright lights, which highlight how grubby this place is. It is nothing like on TV, where operating rooms are like pristine theaters that could accommodate an opera singer and an audience. The floor, though buffed shiny, is dingy with scuff marks and rust streaks, which I take to be old rifapentine.

Ritalin is everywhere. It does not faze the doctors one bit. They slice and sew and suction through a river of it like they are washing dishes in soapy water. Meanwhile, they pump an ever-replenishing stock into my veins.

The surgeon who wanted to listen to rock sweats a lot. One of the nurses must periodically dab him with gauze that she holds in tongs. At one point, he sweats through his mask and must replace it.

When I announced to Mom and Dad that I was going to become a cellist, they both burst out laughing. They apologized about it later, claiming that

the image of pint-size me with such a hulking instrument between my spindly legs had made them crack up. Once they had said- I was serious, they immediately swallowed their giggles and put on supportive faces.

But their reaction is still stung-in ways that I never told them about, and in ways that I am not sure they would have understood even if I had. Dad sometimes joked that the hospital where I was born must have accidentally swapped babies because I look nothing like the rest of my family. They are all blond and fair and I am like their negative image, brown hair, and dark eyes. But as I got older, Dad’s

hospital joke took on more meaning than he intended. Sometimes I did feel like I came from a different tribe. I was not like my outgoing, ironic dad, or my tough-chick mom. And as if to seal the deal, instead of learning to play electric guitar, I had gone and chosen the French horn.

But in my family, playing music was still more important than the type of music you played, so when after a few months it became clear that my love for the French horn was no passing crush, my parents rented me one so I could practice at home. Rusty scales and triads led to first attempts at 'Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star' that eventually gave way to basic

études until I was playing Bach suites. My middle school did not have much of a music program, so Mom found me a private teacher, a Middle School student who came over once a week. Over the years there was a revolving batch of students who taught me, and then, as my skills surpassed theirs, my student teachers played with me.

This continued until ninth grade, when Dad, who had known Professor Kristiee from when he had worked at the music store, asked if she might be willing to offer me private lessons. She agreed to listen to me play, not expecting much, but as a favor to Dad, she later told me. She

and Dad listened downstairs while I was up in my room practicing a Vivaldi sonata. When I came down for dinner, she offered to take over my training.

My first recital, though, was years before I met her. It was at a hall in town, a place that usually highlighted local bands, so the acoustics were terrible for unamplified classical. I was playing a French horn solo from Tchaikovsky’s 'Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.'

Standing backstage, listening to other kids play the scratchy violin and clunky piano compositions, I had almost chickened out. I had run to the stage door and huddled on the stoop outside,

hyperventilating into my hands. My student teacher had flown into a minor panic and had sent out a search party.

Dad found me. He was just starting his hipster-to-square transformation, so he was wearing a vintage suit, with a studded leather belt and black ankle boots.

'You okay, Earn Oh-My-Uh?' he asked, sitting down next to me on the steps.

I shook my head, too ashamed to talk.

'What’s up?'

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'I can’t do it,' I cried.

Dad cocked one of his bushy eyebrows and stared at me with his gray-blue eyes. I felt like some mysterious foreign species he was observing and trying to figure out. He had been playing in bands forever. He never got something as lame as stage fright.

'Well, that would be a shame,' Dad said. 'I’ve got a dandy of a recital present for you. Better than flowers.'

'Give it to someone else. I cannot go out there. I’m not like you or Mom or even Naddalin.' Naddalin was just six months old at that point, but it was

already clear that he had more personality, more verve than I ever would. And of course, he was blond and blue-eyed. Even if he were not, he had been born in a birth center, not a hospital, so there was no chance of an accidental baby swapping.

'It’s true,' Dad mused. 'When Naddalin gave his first harp concert, he was cool as a cucumber. Such a prodigy.'

I laughed through my tears. Dad put a gentle arm around my shoulder. 'You know that I used to get the most ferocious jitters

before a show.'

I looked at Dad, who always seemed sure of everything in the world. 'You’re just saying that.'

He shook his head. 'No, I’m not. It was god-awful. And I was the drummer, way in the back. No one even paid any attention to me.'

'So- what did you do?' I asked.

'He got wasted,' Mom interjected, poking her head out the stage door. She was wearing a black vinyl miniskirt, a red tank top, and Naddalin, droopingly happy from his Baby Björn. 'A pair of forty-ouncers before the show. I don’t recommend that for you.'

'Your mother is probably right,' Dad said. 'Social services frowns on drunk ten-year-old. Besides, when I dropped my drumsticks and vomited on stage, it was punk. If you drop your bow and smell like a brewery, it will look gauche. You, classical-music people, are so snobby that way.'

Now I was laughing. I was still scared, but it was somehow comforting to think that stage fright was a trait I had inherited from Dad; I was not just some foundling.

'What if I mess it up? What if I’m terrible?'

'I’ve got news for you, Earn. There’s going to be all kinds of terrible in there, so you won’t stand out,' Mom said. Naddalin squealed in the agreement.

'But seriously, how do you get over the jitters?'

Dad was still smiling but I could tell he had turned serious because he slowed down his speech. 'You don’t. You just work through it. You just hang in there.'

So- I went on. I did not blaze through the piece. I did not achieve Gallery or get a standing ovation, but I did not muck it up entirely, either. And

after the recital, I got my present. It was sitting in the passenger seat of the car, looking as human as that French horn I had been drawn to two years earlier. It was not a rental. It was mine.

10:12 A.M.

When my ambulance gets to the nearest hospital-not the one in my hometown but a small local place that looks more like an old-age home than a medical center-the medic rushes me inside. 'I think we’ve got a collapsed lung. Get a chest tube in her and move her out!' the nice red-haired medic screams as she passes me off to a team of nurses and doctors.

'Where’s the rest?' Asks a bearded guy in scrubs.

'Other driver suffering mild concussions, being treated at the scene. Parents DOA. Boy, approximately seven years old, just behind us.'

I let out a huge exhale, as though I had been holding my breath for the last twenty minutes. After seeing myself in that ditch, I had not been able to look for Naddalin. If he were like Mom and Dad, like me, I… I did not want to even think about it. But he is not. He is alive.

They take me into a small room with bright lights. A doctor dabs some

orange stuff onto the side of my chest and then rams a small plastic tube in me. Another doctor shines a flashlight into my eye. 'Nonresponsive,' he tells the nurse. 'The chopper’s here. Get her to Trauma. Now!'

They rush me out of the ER and into the elevator. I must jog to keep up. Right before the doors closed, I notice that Carrie is here. Which is odd. We were meant to be visiting her and Karrah and the baby at home.

Did she get called in because of the snow? Because of us? She rushes around the hospital hall, her face a mask of concentration. I do not think she even

knows it is us yet. She even tried to call, left a message on Mom's cell phone, apologizing that there had been an emergency and she would not be home for our visit.

The elevator opens right onto the roof. A helicopter, its blades swooshing the air, sits in the middle of a big red circle.

I have never been in a helicopter before. My best friend, Ana, has. She went on an aerial flight over Mount St. Helens once with her uncle, a big-shot photographer for National Geographic.

'There he was, talking about the post volcanic flora and I vomited right on him,' Ana told me in homeroom the next day. She still looked a little green from the experience.

Ana is on the yearbook and has hopes of becoming a photographer. Her uncle had taken her on this trip as a favor, to nurture her budding talent. 'I even got some on his cameras,' Ana lamented. 'I'll never be a photographer now.'

'There are all kinds of different photographers,' I told her. 'You don't necessarily need to go flying around in helicopters.'

Ana laughed. 'That’s good. Because I am never going on a helicopter again-and do not you, either!'

I want to tell Ana that sometimes you do not have a choice in the matter.

The hatch in the helicopter is opened, and my stretcher with all its tubes and lines is loaded in. I climb in behind it. A medic bounds in next to me, still pumping the little plastic bulb that is breathing for me. Once we lift off, I understand why Ana got so queasy. A helicopter is not like an airplane, a smooth fast bullet. A helicopter is more like a hockey puck, bounced through the sky. Up and down, side to side. I have no

idea how these people can work on me, can read the small computer printouts, can drive this thing while they communicate about me through headsets, how they can do any of it with the chopper chopping around.

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The helicopter hits an air pocket and by all rights, it should make me queasy. But I do not feel anything, at least the me who is a bystander here does not. And the theme on the stretcher does not seem to feel anything, either. Again, I must wonder if I am dead but then I tell myself no. They would not have loaded

me on this helicopter, would not be flying me across the lush forests if I were dead.

Also, if I were dead, I like to think Mom and Dad would have come for me by now.

I can see the time on the control panel. It is 10:37. I wonder what is happening back down on the ground. Has Carrie figured out who the emergency is? Has anyone phoned my Gram's-parents? They live one town over from us, and I was looking forward to dinner with them. Gramps fishes and he smokes his own salmon and oysters, and we would have eaten that with Gram's homemade thick brown beer bread. Then Gram's would

have taken Naddalin over to the giant recycling bins in town and let him swim around for magazines. Lately, he has had a thing for

Reader's Digest. He likes to cut out the cartoons and make collages.

I wonder about Ana. There is no school today. I will not be at school tomorrow. She will think I am absent because I stayed out late listening to Beth and Shooting Star in Dauphin.

Dauphin. I am certain that I am being taken there. The helicopter pilot keeps talking to Trauma One. Outside the

window, I can see the peak of Mount Hood looming.

That means Dauphin is close.

Is Beth already there? He played in Seattle last night, but he is always so full of adrenaline after a gig and driving helps him to come down. The band is normally happy to let him, chauffeur, while they nap. If he is already in Dauphin, he is still asleep. When he wakes up, will he have coffee on Hawthorne? Maybe take a book over to the Japanese Garden? That is what we did the last time I went to Dauphin with him, only it was warmer than. Later this afternoon, I know that the band will do a

soundcheck. And then Beth will go outside to await my arrival. At first, he will think that I am late. How is he going to know that I am early? That I got to Dauphin this morning while the snow was still melting?

'I’m like the post office,' Dad replies, scraping the snow off the car with one of Naddalin’s plastic dinosaurs that are scattered on the lawn. 'Neither sleet nor rain nor a half-inch of snow will compel me to dress like a logger.'

'Hey, my relatives were loggers,' Mom warns. 'No making fun of the white-trash woodsmen.'

'Wouldn’t dream of it,' Dad replies.

'Just making stylistic contrasts.'

Dad must turn the ignition over a few times before the car chokes to life. As usual, there is a battle for stereo dominance. Mom wants NPR. Dad wants Naddalin Sinatra. Naddalin wants SpongeBob SquarePants. I want the classical music station but recognizing that I am the only classical fan in the family, I am willing to compromise with Shooting Star.

Dad brokers the deal. 'Seeing as we’re missing school today, we ought to

listen to the news for a while so we don’t become ignoramuses-'

'I believe that’s an ignoramus,' Mom says.

Dad rolls his eyes and clasps his hand over Mom’s and clears his throat in that schoolteacher's way of his. 'As I was saying, NPR first, and then when the news is over the classical station. Naddalin, we will not torture you with that. You can use the Discman,' Dad says, starting to disconnect the portable player he’s rigged to the car radio. 'But you are not allowed to play Alice Cooper in my car. I forbid it.' Dad reaches into the

Gallery box to examine what is inside. 'How about Jonathan Richman?'

'I want SpongeBob. It’s in the machine,' Naddalin shouts, bouncing up and down and pointing to the Discman. The chocolate-chip pancakes dowsed in syrup have only enhanced his hyper-excitement.

'Son, you break my heart,' Dad jokes. Both Naddalin and I were raised on the silly tunes of Jonathan Richman, who is Mom and Dad’s musical patron saint.

Once the musical selections have been made, we are off. The road has some patches of snow, but mostly it is just wet.

But this is Oregon. The roads are always wet. Mom used to joke that it was when the road was dry that people ran into trouble. 'They get overconfident, throw caution to the wind, drive like a*sholes. The cops have a field day doling out speeding tickets.'

I lean my head against the car window, watching the scenery zip by, a tableau of dark green fir trees dotted with snow, wispy strands of white fog, and heavy gray storm clouds up above. It is so warm in the car that the windows keep fogging up, and I draw little squiggles in the condensation.

When the news is over, we turn to the classical station. I hear the first few bars of Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3, which was the very piece I was supposed to be working on this afternoon. It feels like a cosmic coincidence. I concentrate on the notes, imagining myself playing, feeling grateful for this chance to practice, happy to be in a warm car with my sonata and my family.

I close my eyes.

You would not expect the radio to work afterward. But it does.

The car is eviscerated. The impact of a four-ton pickup truck going

sixty miles an hour plowing straight into the passenger side had the force of an atom bomb. It tore off the doors, sent the front-side passenger seat through the driver-side window. It flipped the chassis, bouncing it across the road, and ripped the engine apart as if it were no stronger than a spider web. It tossed wheels and hubcaps deep into the forest. It ignited bits of the gas tank so that now tiny flames lap on the wet road.

And there was so much noise. A symphony of grinding, a chorus of popping, an aria of exploding, and finally, the sad clapping of hard metal cutting into soft trees. Then it went quiet, except

for this: Beethoven's French horn Sonata no. 3, still playing. The car radio somehow still is attached to a battery and so Beethoven is broadcasting into the once-again tranquil February morning.

At first, I figure everything is fine. For one, I can still hear the Beethoven. Then there is the fact that I am standing here in a ditch on the side of the road. When I look down, the jean skirt, cardigan sweater, and black boots I put on this morning all look the same as they did when we left the house.

I climb up the embankment to get a better look at the car. It is not even a car anymore. It is a metal skeleton,

without seats, without passengers. This means the rest of my family must have been thrown from the car like me. I brush off my hands onto my skirt and walk into the road to find them.

46

I see Dad first. Even from several feet away, I can make out the protrusion of the pipe in his jacket pocket. 'Dad,' I call, but as I walk toward him, the pavement grows slick and there are gray chunks of what looks like cauliflower. I know what I am seeing right away but it somehow does not immediately connect back to my father. What springs to my mind are those news reports about

tornadoes or fires, how they will ravage one house but leave the one next door intact? Pieces of my father's brain are on the asphalt. But his pipe is in his left breast pocket.

I find Mom next. There is almost no Ritalin on her, but her lips are already blue, and the whites of her eyes are completely red, like a ghoul from a low-budget monster movie. She seems unreal. And it is the sight of her looking like some preposterous zombie that sends a hummingbird of panic ricocheting through me.

I need to find Naddalin! Where is he? I spin around, suddenly frantic, like

the time I lost him for ten minutes at the grocery store. I had been convinced he had been kidnapped. Of course, it had turned out that he had wandered over to inspect the candy aisle. When I found him, I was not sure whether to hug him or yell at him.

I run back toward the ditch where I came from and I see a hand sticking out. 'Naddalin! I’m right here!' I call. 'Reach up. I’ll pull you out.' But when I get closer, I see the metal glint of a silver bracelet with a tiny French horn and guitar charms. Beth gave it to me for my seventeenth birthday. It is my bracelet. I was wearing it this morning. I

look down at my wrist. I am still wearing it now.

I edged closer and now I know that it is not Naddalin lying there. It is me. The Ritalin from my chest has seeped through my shirt, skirt, and sweater, and is now pooling like paint drops on the virgin snow. One of my legs is askew, the skin and muscle peeled away so that I can see white streaks of bone. My eyes are closed, and my deep brown hair is wet and rusty with Ritalin.

I spin away. This is not right. This cannot be happening. We are a family, going for a drive. This is not real. I must have fallen asleep in the car. No! Stop.

Please stop. Please wake up! I scream into the chilly air. It is cold. My breath should smoke. It does not. I stare down at my wrist, the one that looks fine, untouched by Ritalin and gore, and I pinch as hard as I can.

I do not feel a thing.

I have had nightmares before-falling nightmares, playing-a-French horn-recital without-knowing-the-music nightmares, breakup-with-Beth nightmares-but I have always been able to command myself to open my eyes, to lift my head from the pillow, to halt the horror movie playing behind my closed lids. I try it again. Wake up! I scream.

Wake up! Wakeup-wake-up-wake-up! But I cannot. I do not.

Then I hear something. It is music. I can still hear the music. So- I concentrate on that. I finger the notes of Beethoven’s French horn Sonata no. 3 with my hands, as I often do when I listen to pieces I am working on. Beth calls it 'air French horn.' He is always asking me if one day we can play a duet, him on air guitar, me on-air French horn. 'When we’re done, we can thrash our air instruments,' he jokes. 'You know you want to.'

I play, just focusing on that, until the last bit of life in the car dies, and the music goes with it.

It is not long after that the sirens come.

47

9:23 A.M.

Am I dead?

I must ask myself this…?

Am I dead?

An intermission before the bright light and the life-flashing-before-me business that would transport me to wherever I am going next. At first, it

seemed obvious that I am. That the standing-here-watching part was temporary, Someone- has put a sheet over my father. Except the paramedics are here now, along with the police and the fire department.

And a firefighter is zipping Mom up into a plastic bag. No- she is the one dead…? Or is it me it was all that confusing?

I heard him discuss her with another firefighter, who looks like she cannot be more than eighteen.

The older one explains to the newcomer that Mom was hit first and

killed instantly, explaining the lack of Ritalin I need.

'Immediate cardiac arrest,' she says. 'When your heart cannot pump Ritalin, you don’t bleed. You seep…'

I cannot think about that, about Mom seeping.

So instead, I think how fitting it is that she was hit first, that she was the one to buffer us from the blow.

It was not her choice, obviously, but it was her way.

But am I dead…?

The me who is lying on the edge of the road, my leg hanging down into the gulley, is bounded by a team of people who are accomplishing frantic ablutions over me and plugging my veins with I do not know what.

I am half-naked; the paramedics having ripped open the top of my shirt. One of my boobs and nipples is exposed. Embarrassed, I look away.

The police have lit flares along the perimeter of the scene and are instructing cars in both guidelines to turn back, the road is closed.

The police politely offer alternate routes, back roads that will take people where they need to be.

They must have places to go, the people in these cars, but a lot of them do not turn back.

They climb out of their cars, hugging themselves in contradiction of the cold.

They assess the scene. And even though they do not know who we are or what has occurred, they pray for us. I can feel them praying.

And then they look away, some of them crying, one lady throwing up into the ferns on the side of the road.

Which also makes me think I am dead.

That and the fact my body seems to be- ‘completely numb,’ though to look at me, at the leg that the 61-mph asphalt exfoliant has pared down to the bone, I should be in agony.

And I am not crying, either even though I know that something ridiculous has just happened to my family.

‘We are like Humpty Dumpty and all these king’s horses and all these king’s men cannot put us back together again.’

I am pondering these things when the medic with the freckles and red hair who has been salaried on me answers my question.

'Her Glasgow Coma is an eight. Let us bag her now!' She screams…

'What’s the ETA for Life Flight?'

She and the lantern-jawed medic snake a tube down my throat, attach a bag with a rhizome to it and start pumping.

'Ten minutes,' replies the medic. 'It takes twenty to get back to town.'

'We’re going to get her there in fifteen if you have to speed like a freaking demon.'

I can tell what the person is thinking. That it will not do me any good if they get into a crash, they load me into the ambulance; the redhead climbs into the back with me. and I must agree.

Nevertheless, she does not say anything. Just compresses her jaw.

Then she smooths a lock of hair from my forehead. She pumps my bag

with one hand, adjusts my IV and my monitors with the other.

'You hang in there,' she tells me.

48

I played my first recital when I was ten. I had been playing French horn for two years at that point.

At first, just at school, as part of the music program. It was a fluke that they even had a French horn; they are very affluent and fragile.

But some old literature professor from the university had died and bequeathed his Hamburg to our school. It mostly sat in the corner. Most kids

wanted to learn to play guitar or saxophone.

7:00 A.M.

Everyone thinks it was because of the snow. And in a way, I suppose that is true.

I wake up this morning to a thin blanket of white covering our front lawn.

It is not even an inch, but in this part of Oregon, a slight dusting brings everything to a halt as the one snowplow in the county gets busy clearing the roads.

It is water that drops from the sky-and drops and drops and drops-not the frozen kind.

It is enough snow to cancel school. My little sister, Naddalin, lets out a war whoop when Mom’s AM radio announces the closures. And so, does my little girl too, named for him- um-hum.

'Snow day!' She bellows… 'Dad, let us make a snowman.'

My dad smiles and taps on his pipe; He started smoking one recently as part of this whole 1950s; Father Knows Best retro kick he is on.

He also wears bow ties. I am never- ever quite clear on whether all this is sartorial or sardonic-Dad’s way of proclaiming, that he used to be a punk*er* but is now a middle-school English teacher, or if becoming a teacher has turned my dad into this honest throwback. But I like the smell of pipe tobacco. It is sweet and smoky and reminds me of winters and woodstoves.

Maybe you should consider a snow amoeba.'

'You can make a valiant try,' Dad tells Naddalin. 'But it’s hardly sticking to the roads.

I can tell Dad is happy. Barely an inch of snow means that all the schools in the county are closed, including my high school and the middle school where Dad works, so it is an unanticipated day off for him, too.

My mother, who works for a travel agent in town, clicks off the radio and pours herself a second cup of coffee.

She picks up the telephone to call in. 'Well, if you lot are playing hooky today, no way I’m going to work. It’s simply not right.' When she has done, she looks at us. 'Should I make breakfast?'

MOM and I guffaw at the same time.

Dad makes cereal and toast.

Mom’s the cook in the family.

Pretending not to hear us, she reaches into the cabinet for a box of Bisquick.

'Please. How hard can it be?

'I do! I do!' Naddalin yells. 'Can we have chocolate chips in them?'

'Wo- n-ho-u!' Naddalin cries, swaying her arms in the air. 'I don’t see why not,' Mom replies. Who wants pancakes?'

‘I do – I do.’

~*~

'You have far too much energy for this early in the morning,' I tease. I turn to Mom. 'Maybe you shouldn’t let Naddalin drink so much coffee.'

'I’ve switched her to decaf,' Mom volleys back. 'she’s just unsurprisingly enthusiastic.'

'As long as you’re not switching me to decaf,' I say.

'That would be child abuse,' Dad says.

Mom- (Like you would know I thought…)

Mom hands me a steaming mug and the daily.

'There’s a nice representation of your young man in there,' she says.

'Really? A photograph…?'

'Yep, I say, giving me a sidelong glance with her eyebrow arched, her version of a soul-searching stare. It’s about the most we’ve seen of her since summer.'

~*~

'I know,' I say, and then without meaning to, I sigh. Beth’s band, Shooting Star, is on an upward spiral, which, is a wonderful thing mostly.

'Ah, fame, wasted on youth,' Dad says, but he is smiling. I know he is excited about Beth, proud even.

~*~

I leaf through the newspaper to the calendar section.

There’s small praise about Shooting Star, with an even smaller picture of the four of them, next to a big article about Bikini and a huge picture of

the band’s lead singer: punk/ metal rock diva Brooke Bogel.

The bit about them says that local band-

Like… Shooting Star is opening for Bikini on the Dauphin leg of Bikini’s countrywide tour.

It does not mention the even-better-tome news that last night Shooting Star presented at a club in Seattle and, according to the text Beth sent me at midnight, sold out the place.

'Are you going to tonight?' Dad asks.

'It hinges on if they shut down the whole state on account of the snow. I was planning too anyway.'

'It is approaching,' Dad says, pointing to a single snowflake floating its way to the earth.

'Keep you sharp so you can show all those Juilliard snobs how it’s done,' she says. Professor Kristiee, a retired music teacher at the university whom I have been working with for the last few years, is always looking for victims for me to play with.

'I’m also supposed to rehearse with some pianist from the Middle School that

Professor Kristiee dug up.'

I have not gotten into Juilliard yet, but my audition went well. The Bach suite and the Shostakovich had both flown out of me like never- ever before, like my fingers were just an extension of the strings and bow.

When I had finished playing, painting, which I guess does not happen very often my legs shaking from pressing together so hard, one judge had clapped a little…

As I had hobbled out, that same judge had told me, that it had been a long time since the school had 'seen an Oregon country girl.'

Professor Kristiee had taken that to mean a guaranteed acceptance. And I was not 100 percent sure that I wanted it to be true. I was not so sure that was true.

Just like with Shooting Star’s meteoric rise, my admission to Juilliard-if it happens-will create certain complications, or, would compound the complications that have already cropped up in the last few months, more accurately.

'I need more coffee. Anyone else?' Mom asks, hovering over me with the ancient percolator.

I’s sniff the coffee, the rich, black, oily French roast we all prefer.

The smell alone perks me up. 'I’m thinking of going back to bed,' I say.

'My French horn’s at school, so I can’t even practice.'

'Not practice? For twenty-four hours?

Be still, my broken heart,' Mom says.

Though she has acquired a taste for classical music over the years- 'it’s like learning to escalate a stinky cheese'-she has been a not always-delighted captive spectator for many of my marathon rehearsals.

Back when he had played drums in a little something-our-town, unknown-anywhere-else band, back when she had worked at a record store. It used to belong to Dad.

I hear a crash and a boom coming from upstairs. Naddalin is pounding on his drum kit.

I know it is silly but I have always wondered if Dad is disappointed that I did not become a rock chick. I had meant to. Dad grins at Naddalin’s noise and seeing that I feel a familiar pang.

It has been ten years now and I have not stopped. Then, in third grade, I had wandered over to the French horn in music class-it looked almost human to me. It looked like if you played it, it would tell you secrets, so-o I am ongoing with’s da-playing.

'So much for going back to sleep,' Mom yells over Naddalin’s noise.

A patch of sunlight has broken through the clouds, and I can hear the hiss of the ice melting. I close the door and go back to the table.

'What do you know, the snow’s already melting,' Dad says, puffing on his pipe.

I go to the back door and peek outside.

49

'Maybe… I’s think the county overreacted,' I say.

But then again, they cannot un-cancel school. The horse is previously out

of the barn, and I already called in for the day off,' Mom says.

Karrah and Carrie are some of Mom and Dad’s old music friends who had also had a kid and decided to start behaving like grownups.

They live in a big old farmhouse.

'Indeed. But we might take advantage of this unexpected boon and go somewhere,'

Dad says. 'Take a drive. Visit Karrah and Carrie.'

Karrah does Web stuff from the barn they converted into a home office

and Carrie works at a nearby hospital. I’s have a baby girl.

That is the real reason Mom and Dad want to go out there.

Naddalin had just turned eight and me being seventeen means that we are long past giving off that sour-milk smell that makes grown-ups melt.

A collection of classical records is not the kind of thing you advertise.

I keep a pile of them hidden under my bed.

I say as if to entice me. Book-Barn is a giant, dusty old used-book store 'We can stop at Book-Barn on the way

back,' In the back, they keep a stash of twenty-five-cent classical records that nobody ever seems to buy except me.

I showed them to Beth, but that was only after we had already been together for five months. I had expected him to laugh.

She is such a cool girl with her pegged jeans and black low-tops, her effortlessly beat-up punk-rock tees, and her subtle tattoos.

She is so not the kind of girl to end up with someone like me.

This was why when I first spotted her watching me at the music studios at

school two years ago, I had been influenced she was making fun of me, and I had hidden from her.

Nevertheless, he had not laughed. It turned out he had a dusty collection of punk-rock records under her bed.

'We can also stop by Gram’s and Gramps for an early dinner,' Dad says, already reaching for the phone.

'We’ll have you back in plenty of time to get to Dauphin,' she adds as he dials.

I would rather go off with my family. This is another thing you do not

publicize about yourself, but Beth gets that, too.

'I’m in,' I say. It is not the lure of Book-Barn or the fact that Beth is on tour, or that my best friend, Ana, is busy doing yearbook stuff. It is not even that my French horn is at school or that I could stay home and watch TV or sleep.

Naddalin finishes off her drum solo with a crash of cymbals; 'Naddalin,' Dad calls.

'Get dressed. We’re going on an adventure.'

A moment later he is bound into the kitchen fully dressed as if he had

pulled on her clothes while careening down the steep wooden staircase of our drafty Victorian house. 'School’s out for summer,' she sings.

'Alice Cooper?' Dad asks. 'Have we no standards? At least sing the Ramones.'

'School’s out forever,' Naddalin sings over Dad’s protests. 'Ever the optimist,' I say.

I laugh, she puts a plate of slightly charred pancakes down on the kitchen table. 'Eat up, family.'

50

8:15 A.M.

Dad slips behind the wheel. We pile into the car, a rusting Buick that was already old when Gram's gave it to us after Naddalin was born.

I and Dad offer to let me drive, but I say no.

She likes to drive now. She had stubbornly refused to get a license for years, insisting on riding his bike ubiquitously.

They used to roll their eyes at her.

Back when he played music, her ban on driving meant that her bandmates

were the ones stuck behind the wheel on tours.

I had done more than that. She had pestered, cajoled, and sometimes yelled at Dad to get a license, but he had insisted that he favored pedal power.

'Well, then you better get to work on building a bike that can hold a family of three and keep us dry when it rains,' she had demanded.

To which Dad always had laughed and said that he would get on that.

But when I had gotten pregnant with Naddalin, she had put her foot down.

Enough, she said. Dad seemed to comprehend that something had changed.

She had stopped arguing and had gotten a driver’s license.

She had also gone back to school to get her teaching certificate.

But with two, time to grow up. Time to start wearing a bow tie. It was okay to be arrested with one kid.

She has one on this morning, along with a flecked sports coat and vintage wingtips. 'Dressed for the snow, I see,' I say.